“If I’m not a ship, I’m a boat that could be”: Seasteading and the post-social political imagination

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ABSTRACT

"If I'm not a ship, I'm a boat that could be": Seasteading and the post-social political imagination

Isabelle Simpson

Founded in 2008, The Seasteading Institute (TSI) is a California non-profit organization set up "to facilitate the development of permanent, autonomous cities deriving legal autonomy from their location in international waters – Earth's last unclaimed frontier" (Hencken, 2013, cited in Barksdale). These floating city-states, or seasteads, would exist on platforms inspired by cruise ships, aircraft carriers and oil platforms and become frontier habitations for aquapreneurs and ocean pioneers wanting to experiment with new systems of governance. The seasteading movement, in line with Silicon Valley's tech culture and (a)political ethos where individuals are encouraged to exit the political structure (Friedman 2009; Thiel 2009, 2014), is part of a larger trend toward postsociality and depoliticization. Much more than just a new utopian lifestyle on offer, seasteading is part of a digital countercultural movement driven by techno-libertarianism (a libertarian political approach to technology), and anarcho-capitalism. Ultimately, the certitude that technologically advanced, subject-centered, small-scale communities are more appropriate than large democratic political structures as catalysts for social change illustrates a broader shift in the collective imagination from social and political preoccupations to preoccupations with individual enhancement.

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INTRODUCTION

Founded in 2008, The Seasteading Institute (TSI) is a California non-profit organization set up "to facilitate the development of permanent, autonomous cities deriving legal autonomy from their location in international waters – Earth's last unclaimed frontier" (Hencken, 2013, cited in Barksdale). These floating city-states, or seasteads, would exist on platforms inspired by cruise ships, aircraft carriers and oil platforms and become frontier habitations for aquapreneurs and ocean pioneers wanting to experiment with new systems of governance. TSI's *Floating City Project Report* (2014) describes plans to build 50-meter sided square and pentagon platforms with three-story buildings for approximately $500/square foot of usable space. A square platform could house 20 to 30 residents, and cost approximately $15 million (p.7). Seasteads' modularity would allow people to "vote with their feet," an idea put forward by economist Charles Mills Tiebout in 1956 and later by libertarian and anarcho-capitalist theorist David D. Friedman[1] ([1973] 2014), and the "dynamic geography" of the ocean would encourage "competitive governance" (P. Friedman, 2009; P. Friedman and B. Taylor, 2012) which in turn would create incentives for governments to innovate and provide better rules to attract citizens.

By colonizing the oceans, The Seasteading Institute aims to "maximize entrepreneurial freedom to create blue jobs to welcome anyone to the Next New World" (TSI, "About," n.d.). Industries that could be developed on seasteads range from aquaculture farms to floating healthcare, medical research islands, hotels, and sustainable energy powerhouses. If everything goes according to plan, "the first floating cities with significant political autonomy might become reality by 2020" (Floating City Project Report, 2014, p.7). The Seasteading Institute hopes that they will allow the next generation of ocean pioneers and seavangelists[2] to

[1] David D. Friedman is the son of the economist Milton Friedman and the father of TSI co-founder Patri Friedman.

[2] "Seavangelists," "aquapreneurs," "ocean pioneers," "Blue Frontier," and "Blue Revolution" are catchwords used on TSI's website and in TSI's newsletters signed by Randolph Hencken, Executive Director, or Joe Quirk, Communications Director. The newsletters often end with a salutation such as "See you at sea" (11 April 2015), "Toward a more peaceful and prosperous world" (2 August 2014), "To a healthy ocean" (10 August 2014), and "For a future of free floating societies" (17 January 2016). These catchwords and phrases create a new vocabulary or repertoire for the idea of seasteading and they also send a call to action. The underlying message is that a better future can only be possible outside the existing political structure.

"peacefully test new ideas for governance" so that "the most successful can then inspire change in governments around the world" (TSI, "Vision / Strategy," n.d.).

The Seasteading Institute is the brainchild of Patri Friedman, a Google engineer and the grandson of Nobel-prized economist Milton Friedman. Friedman read a web article on floating habitations, *Seasteading: Homesteading the High Seas* (1998, 2001), by Wayne Gramlich, a computer engineer who previously worked at Sun Microsystems[3] and the president of the Homebrew Robotics Club[4], and he contacted him. When the two men realized they lived in the same city, they agreed to meet for lunch and "The Seasteading Institute was born" (W. Gramlich, personal communication, October 20, 2014). For a time, Friedman and Gramlich worked on what is known as "The Book" (Friedman and Gramlich, n.d.) but according to Gramlich, Friedman did most of the work. Gramlich was more interested in the engineering aspect ("getting things done") than in the political ambitions of seasteading.

Gramlich participated to the first two TSI annual conferences but discussions about "heavily armed people, canons, torpedoes," and other defense systems against pirates[5] were not that exciting to him. He figured that the navy would protect the seasteads and was more interested in the business opportunities seasteading would offer (W. Gramlich, personal communication, October 20, 2014). Gramlich left the organization in 2009, shortly before the first Ephemerisle gathering, a seasteading festival first organized by The Seasteading Institute. When TSI announced that Ephemerisle was too expensive to organize and would not happen the next year, seasteading enthusiasts and volunteers took over. The experiment has been repeated every year since.

The Seasteading Institute has received significant media coverage (*The Economist*, 2011; *Forbes,* 2012*; The Independent*, 2013; *Bloomberg*, 2014; *Wired*, 2009, 2015; Meerman, 2015) partly because of the famous relatives of its founder, Patri Friedman, and also because it receives most of its funding from Peter Thiel, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist who co-founded PayPal with Elon Musk and other members of the so-called PayPal Mafia and who also was the

[3] Founded in 1982, Sun Microsystems significantly evolved several key computing technologies. It was acquired by Oracle in 2010 for US $7.4 billion (*Associated Press*, 2010).

[4] Not to be confused with the Homebrew Computer Club, an early computer hobbyist group in Silicon Valley which met from March 5, 1975 to December 1986.

[5] See Steinberg and al., 2012, p.1533, for a description of TSI's second annual conference.

angel investor in Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook. Peter Thiel is also well-known for his criticism of the higher education bubble and for his investments in life-extension research (Packer, 2011; Brown, 2014).[6] He was introduced to The Seasteading Institute when an employee at his hedge fund, Clarium Capital, shared with him an online piece that Patri Friedman had written on the subject. Soon after, Friedman was pitching his idea to Thiel (Miles, 2011) and to date the Thiel Foundation has donated over a million dollars to The Seasteading Institute (TSI, "Donate," n.d.).

The Seasteading Institute currently has an Executive and a Communications Directors, a Board of Trustees and a Board of Advisors, all of whom are men except for one (TSI, "Staff / Board / Advisors," n.d.).[7] Three of the six trustees also work for the Thiel Foundation including its President. The Seasteading Institute has also assembled a team of men and women "ambassadors" from around the world who are "volunteers committed to promoting the seasteading vision and representing the organization" (TSI, "Ambassadors," n.d.).

> Each ambassador's efforts are crucial to the success of The Seasteading Institute's movement building campaign. Ambassadors take on an important role representing the organization and advocating on behalf of the movement at conferences, schools, other events, online and through other special assignments. We seek to maximize the usefulness of any ambassador's unique skill set. (TSI, "Ambassadors," n.d.)

Seasteading ambassadors are described as "credentialed, qualified, pragmatic idealists who plan to apply hard economics, evolutionary principles, and business savvy in order to create the first nations not to aggress against any people" (TSI, "Ambassadors," n.d.). They help expand the network by making The Seasteading Institute known as well as contributing their own knowledge. Ambassadors are actors and "spokespersons which 'speak for'" and justify the group existence (Latour, 2005, p.31). The Institute's also has supporters around the globe who

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[6] Here is a media description of Peter Thiel: "Thiel, whose net worth is reported to be $2.2 billion, is Silicon Valley royalty, and a singular figure even in that rarefied world. He is a gay practising Christian, a libertarian who has thrown money and support behind the political campaigns of the Republican John McCain and the Libertarian Ron Paul, and who sits on the steering committee of the Bilderberg Group – the elite band of the rich and powerful from politics, industry and business that convenes each year to discuss nobody-outside-the-inner-circle-quite-knows-what. Above all, he is a man with a utopian belief in the power of technology to change the world" (Brown, 2014).

[7] The Seasteading Institute is a "small l" libertarian organization. Libertarianism does not approve of affirmative action and from this perspective the gender of board members is irrelevant. It does show, however, that most active participants in the seasteading movement are males.

actively discuss seasteading and share related information on TSI's website's forum or Reddit assuring its digital reality. The Seasteading Institute's donators, staff, volunteers, supporters as well as the texts, newsletters, podcasts produced by TSI and the artistic work created by supporters form what can be called the seasteading movement or the seasteading network.

Digital counterculture

In the summer of 2014, I went to California to attend Ephemerisle, an annual seasteading gathering held on the Sacramento Delta, near Stockton. Ephemerisle participants spend approximately one week on stationary houseboats arranged in islets on the Sacramento River in "a floating celebration of community, learning, art and seasteading" (Ephemerisle, 2014). I arrived a few days before the event and, while in San Francisco, I stayed at a professor's friend in Haight-Ashbury right where Tom Wolfe's *Electric Acid Kool-Aid Test* (1968) begins. I enthusiastically described seasteading and Ephemerisle to my host but, to my dismay, this is what he wrote my professor when I came back: "I hope she has more life and perhaps work experiences to weigh up the smooth-talking flim and flam and egos of the entrepreneurial tech and new-age lifestyles on offer – for the last 20 years or more actually!"

My host, born and raised in California, was not wrong about The Seasteading Institute being the latest in a long lineage of local countercultural and aspiring-pioneers movements. One immediately thinks of the communes of the sixties (see Turner, 2006) which, together with the Beat Generation of the mid-fifties, have consecrated the East Coast, and California in particular, as a space of American open-mindedness and progressivism. So is seasteading just another patently Californian dream? How does it differ from the new age movements my host referred to? What I failed to demonstrate to him at the time is that seasteading is related to previous local intentional communities initiatives, obviously, but it is also different, way different, because seasteading does not simply aim to challenge the status quo but to disrupt it, not to change the nation but to exit it. The Seasteading Institute invite us to abandon "traditional" political activism on the ground that protests and letters to representatives are not effective and instead to start building the future outside existing political and geographical boundaries.

Seasteading challenges the contemporary conception of society, which was always just a concept anyway (Wolf, 2001), and which, "geared to the nation-state and to horizontal concepts of social structure, loses much of its plausibility in an era of globalization" (Knorr Cetina 2005, p.5). Instead, it proposes to experiment with new modes of governance and social organizations which would be "beyond democracy" (Quirk, 2015a). So to understand seasteading, better questions to ask are: why and how does the idea of communities outside the boundaries of the nation-state attracts people? What does seasteading tell us about how Western techno-progressists conceptualize "society" and "community"? At a time of growing criticism against the nation-state and when political borders can be transcended in a few clicks, how does seasteading, a technological "imaginary," a "repertoire by which the world can be re-imagined, and in being re-imagined be remade" (Verran, 2001, in Law, 2004, p.122), influence, challenge or reinforce conceptions of political belonging and of being a social actor in the world?

The seasteading movement, in line with Silicon Valley's tech culture and (a)political ethos where individuals are encouraged to exit the political structure (Friedman 2009; Thiel 2009, 2014), is part of a larger trend toward postsociality and depoliticization. Much more than just a new utopian lifestyle on offer, seasteading is part of a digital countercultural movement driven by techno-libertarianism (a libertarian political approach to technology), and anarcho-capitalism. Anarcho-capitalism, a term generally attributed to heterodox economist Murray Rothbard (1926-1995), "rejects state involvement in both economic and personal affairs and advocates the elimination of political government and the privatization of the system of institutions" (D. D. Friedman 2014 [1973]). Writing about the social construction of the ocean, Philip Steinberg (2011) points out that "as unclaimed and unclaimable 'international' space, the world-ocean lends itself to being constructed as the space of anarchic competition par excellence" (p.7). As a free "aquatory," (P. Friedman, 2009b) and a "blank canvas" (P. Friedman and B. Taylor, 2011, p.13), the ocean offers the ideal Romanticized space of anarcho-capitalist competition.

Theoretical framework

The method of actor-network theory, originating from science and technologies studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s as an "object-oriented sociology for object-oriented humans" (Latour, 2005, p.74) appears the most adequate to discuss a movement anchored in science and technology. There are conceptual similarities between seasteading and actor-network theory that are too obvious to ignore, especially in how both conceptualize "society" and "social". From an actor-network theory perspective, "society is not a place, a thing, a domain, or a kind of stuff but a provisional movement of new associations" (Latour, 2005, p.238). The seasteading idea of voting with one's feet suggests a similar conceptualization of society as flowing, floating associations. For seasteading and actor-network theory, social is "the name of a type of momentary association which is characterized by the way it gathers together into new shapes" (Latour, 2005, p.65).

The Seasteading Institute also acts as a mediator (Latour, 2005) in network forums (Turner, 2006). A network forum is "a series of meetings, publications and digital networks within which members of multiple (and multidisciplinary) communities can meet and collaborate and imagine themselves as members of a single community" (Turner, 2006, Loc. 130, 1083). Mediators "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (Latour 2005). Acting (or "performing") in network forums, TSI takes nineteenth century romantic ideals of individual rights, emphasis on the self, belief in the limitless possibilities inherent in change and progress, spontaneity and imagination, and reshapes them according to a techno-optimist, anarcho-capitalist perspective. The emphasis on the self becomes an imperative for self-enhancement and a celebration of "entrepreneurship as the new common sense" (Szeman, 2015). Change and progress operate according to evolutionary competition and market rule. Spontaneity and imagination are canalized through technology into software that transcend politics and seek to render it obsolete. But seasteading is also about using political and social imagination to challenge the status quo of what David Graeber describes as the "functional society." So to grasp the complexity of the seasteading project, we must first consider it in the context of the history of innovation and the role that imagination plays in technological development and political change.

The first chapter is an account of a debate between anthropologist David Graeber and venture capitalist Peter Thiel in 2014 on the causes of the current stagnation in technological development. Imagination, technology and community emerged as central themes throughout this research and the debate helps to situate seasteading within the ongoing discourse about technology and the future of governance. Chapter 2 looks at seasteading in fiction and describes other attempts at seasteading in modern history. This opens on a discussion of the criticism against a hypermobile, transnational elite accused of seceding not only from a territory but from social responsibility. Conversely, seasteading and the network forums is it part of present themselves as social-capitalist initiatives, or social entrepreneurship, responding to the failure of governments to meet the challenges of globalization and dedicated "to make the world a better place." I look at one such initiative, Voice and Exit, "a conference on the future of technology, society and culture" (www.voiceandexit.com).

In Chapter 3 I visit Ephemerisle, an annual seasteading gathering, and I explore how the experimental intentional communities creates what a participant calls the "idea of neo-paleo intentional community." This is also an occasion to examine the differences between seasteading and survivalism, another attempt at living off the political grid. Chapter 4 introduces seasteading supporters' whose own conceptualizations problematizes seasteading and ask us to consider who seasteading is really for and what impact it would have on society and the environment. Seasteading is an unusual topic and it easy to dismiss it based on its utopian qualities as my San Francisco host did but the reader will benefit from an open mind and an imagination alert to a multiplicity of possibilities.

"Onward to free seas."[8]

[8] Quirk, Joe. (2015 December 6). *Podcast: Edward Stringham's book "Private Governance."* The Seasteading Institute Newsletter.

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IMAGINATION, TECHNOLOGY AND THE FUTURE OF GOVERNANCE

The Seasteading Institute responds to a perceived stagnation in political and technological innovation resulting from a lack of incentives for governments to provide better rules (Friedman, 2009; Thiel, 2009). So I was happy to learn in an advertisement from *The Baffler* published on Facebook[9] that a debate on the technological stagnation in America between venture capitalist and technologist Peter Thiel and anthropologist and anarchist activist David Graeber, titled "No Future For You," would be held in New York. The debate was held at the Library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, a non-profit organization founded in 1785 to offer educational, philanthropic and cultural programs, including a tuition-free Mechanics Institute (General Society, "About," 2013). The Library, located at 20 West 44th Street just across from the Harvard Club, was founded in 1820 and is the second oldest in New York City (General Society, "About," 2013).

Historically, New York's Mechanics' Institutes were often funded by local industrialists "on the grounds that they would ultimately benefit from having more knowledgeable and skilled employees" (General Society, "History," 2013). Between 1898 and 1903, steel magnate, philanthropist and author of the *Gospel of Wealth* Andrew Carnegie (2006 [1889]), contributed over half a million dollars to the General Society of which he was a member (General Society, "History," 2013). In his ethnography of the new philanthropy of Silicon Valley, Marc Abélès (2002)[10] retraces how industrialists like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller have influenced venture philanthropy, "an investment in a non-profit according to the methods of venture capitalism," in the United States. The new philanthropy was strongly encouraged by the influence of puritanism which associated excessive wealth to malediction. Before money turned on its owner, it was preferable to distribute it to social causes outside the donator's own

[9] The details of how I heard about events, contacted potential informants and made financial transactions are significant since, in a way, I was given the technological tools that facilitated this research by the very people I researched. Consider, for example, that Peter Thiel made early investments in PayPal, Facebook, LinkedIn and Airbnb, all of which I used for this research.

[10] All citations from Abélès are my translations.

network. Successful industrialists could thus avoid being seen as robber barons and extend their social networks at the same time (p.112). In that sense, philanthropy is conceived as an "ethical prolongation of capitalism" (pp.206-207, 213, 261). Abélès explains how, as the charitable enterprise became part of the system of thought, it introduced two new elements: donation (gift) and reason (p.112), setting the stage for the development of a "scientific charity" and, in the late 1990s, social entrepreneurship (see Dees, 1998). As Abélès show, this business approach which aims to make the social marketable is especially popular in Silicon Valley techno-optimist business world.

Now proudly standing in twenty-first century New York, the General Society Library building and the Society that occupies it with the support of wealthy industrialists had been at the forefront of social reform and progress for a long time and seemed a fitting venue for a debate on technology's future between a libertarian venture capitalist and philanthropist and an anthropologist and anarchist activist. Two female volunteers in their early or mid-twenties, one whom was reading *Capitalism, A Ghost Story* by Arundhati Roy (2014), scanned the e-ticket ($21.49 USD, purchased with PayPal) glaring on my iPhone, gave me the debate's flyer, and invited me to pick a pin (Graeber or Thiel, I took both). People started to come in. *The Baffler* had emailed ticket holders the previous day to ask those who could not attend to give back their tickets for a refund. Although it would be broadcast online, there was an unexpected demand and the event had rapidly sold out. A young woman asked if the seat next to me was taken (she too had seen the advertisement on Facebook) and an older man sitting behind us started a polite conversation. We marveled at the collection of books around us. Books are an outmoded technology, but they can serve as artifacts, as a stage set to authorize and legitimate public events.[11] In the General Society Library, they definitely had that effect and, by their thematic and disposition, also situated the debate within walls of Western thought on technological and social progress.

[11] I thank Dr. Sally Cole for pointing this out to me.

The functional society

John Summers, editor of *The Baffler* and debate host, introduced the two speakers. David Graeber, a regular contributor to the magazine, spoke first about an article he wrote, "Flying Cars And The Declining Rate Of Profit" (2012). If you grew up at the turn of the century reading H.G. Wells and

> [you imagined] what the world would be like 50 years later, well, you basically got it right, you know. There were flying machines, and submarines, and rockets, […], and TV, radio. We didn't get the time machine. But a lot of the basic inventions they expected to happen did in fact happen.

On the other hand, if like Graeber you grew up in the sixties, you probably half-expected to see teleportation devices, Mars bases and immortality drugs by the year 2000: "And I don't think any of us expected we get all of that stuff during our lifetime," Graeber said, "but I don't think it occurred to any of us that we're not going to get them." In the year 2000, "we pretended that really we were living in this world of technological wonder" but the truth is that we had not accomplished much compared to the technological progress made in the first half of the 20th century. Graeber identifies two reasons why that is: a "subconscious change of direction" in investment and research and development away from technology that happened in the 1960s and 1970s, and a shift from profit from production to profit from finance.

The 1960s reacted strongly to the development of technology:

> It was brewing for some time before. [….] All this unrest, people were saying: 'Imagine what it's gonna be like when the entire working class is replaced by robots, or we're all gonna turn into hippies and dropouts. It's gonna be chaos.'

Technology was perceived as endangering the social order and, around that time, there was a shift in the direction of technological investment, particularly in information, medical and military technologies "and away from all that sort of space age stuff that had been largely to impress people in competition with the Soviets both in production and in consumerism." But this shift isn't a sufficient explanation: despite all the money invested in medical and military research, "we haven't got anywhere near what we thought we were gonna have." If technological development is stagnating, Graeber argued, it is because of the functional structure of society in which radicals and eccentrics have been muted and where profit from

production has been traded for the more abstract profit from finance with the result of restricting imagination and limiting the potential for social change and technological progress.

> We're caught in a society that almost unprecedently has nothing to do with its eccentrics. A functional society. Almost any society that has ever existed has something to do with brilliant, imaginative, but extremely impractical people. We don't know what to do with them anymore. It's like they're all living in their mother's basement saying things on the Internet, you can't tell which are crazy … and which have actually something to contribute.

Graeber concluded by saying:

> If you wanna have maximized possibilities, unexpected breakthroughs, you know, it's pretty obvious what the best policy is: get a bunch of creative people, give them the resources they need for a certain amount of time, you make them hang out with each other but basically you leave them alone, and you know, [most are] gonna end up not coming up with anything at all but a few of them will come up with something that will surprise themselves. If you wanna minimize the possibilities about expected breakthroughs, take those same people and then tell them they are not gonna get any resources at all unless they spend the majority of their time competing with one another to prove to you they already know what they're going to create. Well that's the system we have, and it incredibly effective in stifling any possibility of innovation.

Just do it

Interestingly, Graeber's description of the best policy for innovation could also correspond to a startup environment or a hackathon. The difference is that Graeber argues that this policy should apply to everyone and startup incubators carefully select the teams and projects they will invest in based on their capacity to compete in the market. Peter Thiel, who co-founded Founders Fund, a major startup incubator, took on the microphone:

> There is a disturbing amount I actually agree with David on here. I was careful to wear a suit tonight so I wouldn't get confused with him but I'm actually... The tagline on our website Founders Fund is "They promised us flying cars and all we got was 140 characters" and I do think that we have this … two tracks in technology in the last 40 years where there has been a very rapid progress, computer, internet, the world of bits, and there's been much more limited

> progress in the world of atoms, flying cars, transportation, new forms of energy, new medicines, all kind of other things that could be very transformative for our society.

Thiel agreed with Graeber that there is something about technology that has been "relatively stagnant for the last 40 years." There is "no obvious reason," he said, why we have not found a cure for cancer, or why "we're not even thinking declaring a war on Alzheimer." This lack of ambition "sort of indicates how much lower our expectations for the future have been dialed down. […] At a minimum, we would have learned why it's impossible. We're not even trying to do that."

From Thiel's perspective, this fact of stagnation requires that two somewhat different questions be asked: "why did this happen and what should be done now?" The first question, he said, is important but "invites almost endless speculation." We could come up with "all sorts of causal explanations" and debate for months and, Thiel suspects, "we wouldn't actually figure out why this happened." So "the more important question to ask is really: what should be done now?"

> So it's like you're sick: why did you get sick? How do you get better? The questions why you got sick and how you get better I think are often quite separate questions, and what I think the basic thing people need to do is they need to just start working on these kinds of things again.

Graeber had been looking for the origins of the sickness to find solutions and get to the roots of the problems. Thiel suggested that it was more effective and efficient to look for a cure. We cannot plan the future by wasting time looking at the past. The solution is to act now regardless of obstacles. "We always sort of blame the bureaucracy, we can blame the superstructures, but I think there is a surprising amount where we can just start doing something, you know."

Sympathetic to Graeber's view of anarchism as something you do and acting as if you were already free, Thiel suggested:

> I think it should be, not be just not just free to think, free to speak, or free to break things, but also free to build things and that we're free to start building the future today and we can do his all sorts of different ways. … You know, when we started PayPal I said we're going to hire a lawyer for the first year because I knew … we weren't allowed to do this, we just broke all the rules, the system got built, and then sort of a year later you ask for forgiveness, you don't ask

> for permission. And I think something like that is sort of a template that is working in many of these cases.

It might have worked in the case of PayPal but ignoring the rules does not work so smoothly when, for example, a large crowd of people decide to occupy a public park near a financial centre. Indirectly, Thiel pointed out that breaking the rules can be easier for small entrepreneurial groups than for large mass movements. Another reason why Thiel has a preference for startups is that "small groups are easier to convince" than large masses. He concluded:

> I think you have to convince a much smaller number of people given that we're in this culture where there is a failure of the imagination, where we no longer, you know, have sort of common way to talk about a wildly different future. I think the way to get out of it is by convincing small number of people that the future can look really different and that's what looks like a startup or some new venture or something like that. I don't think you do it by convincing a vast mass movement and I know all sorts of way in which you can say well it's unfair, you have to be inclusive, you have to get everybody involved or it's no good but I sort of think that if we say that we should only develop these technologies if they are developed collectively by everybody simultaneously… there is a weird way in which that become a reason not to do anything at all. You know, whenever you say we're not gonna do X until everybody can do X, that is a statement that we're not gonna do X at all. … If you take something like climate change seriously, or any of these sorts of issues, you know, we need working on energy solutions today, and that's why I'm not going to wait for some mass movement, I'm going to try just convince a small number of people so we can get going right now.

Exit by the front door

David Graeber replied that he thought Thiel was "quite right in saying that we don't need to change people's minds first on a large scale." Describing his own experience at Occupy Wall Street, Graeber explained how people who had always assumed that it was impossible for a large group of people to come to a collective decision actually found out that it could be possible: "What we learned from that is that people's everyday experience is sort of organized in such a way as to convince them that it isn't." The real question, for Graeber, "has more to do

with the larger structure." Thiel recalled how he turned away from trying to change the larger structure and explained why he encourages others to do the same:

> I use to believe that the right way to do it was all sort of lobbying for internal change or that all these different things you should do and I concluded that it would be much more effective just to encourage tons of people to leave, and that it was actually the easier thing to do. I spent a lot of time looking at it…. And so I thought it was actually better just to get people to leave. And I think this is the issue. I'd say yes there are problems with all kinds of structures in our society. They probably are causing some problems. But it's not where I want to put the focus of what to change. […] And yes so many structures exist they stall us own, but we should just start acting as though we were already free. And I think there are some things you absolutely can't do. […] But there are lots of other things we can do. And instead of sort beating our heads against brick walls, we should try to go down the various paths that are actually still available.

Graeber's point that the structure of the functional society prevents the majority from innovating, let alone exit society, was either missed or ignored by Thiel. "The startup is a nice model for a certain things that have never been done, Graeber said, but I don't think you have to assume this is the only possible from which breakthrough come from." Thiel replied that indeed, startups are not the only way to do things but "the models we have to work on are the ones that work on a very small scale and where we don't need as many people." It is "easier to start a startup to go to Mars than changing NASA administration." Perhaps, as Graeber suggested, "we have to ask why that is."

Thiel agreed again that "there are all these structural things," then went on to explain how he was on a super track career, graduated from Stanford Law School (he paused and then refrained from naming the university, mentioning only that he went to law school), and then left "through the front door": "I do always push back a little bit on how powerless people really are and you know, I understand that people are not creative and not doing more in all sorts of contexts but you know, I think there are actually a lot of ways to do things."

No future for you, except in Silicon Valley

When both men were asked whether they had political positions "that are separate from the utopian-political, utopian-technological universe that you'd like to see you can agree on?" Peter Thiel immediately clarified that he does not think of himself as political, to what Graeber replied: "Which is why it's funny we're saying this is a debate, because you know I've been part of one of those basic movements where we have to work through the political system. […] One thing I find in some of the stuff I've been doing economically [is that there are] different ways of thinking about money."

Graeber argued that we should acknowledge how money works and develop types of economic policies which would unleash more creativity. Whereas Thiel described money as the "perfect virtual good," Graeber suggested that "Money isn't just measuring the value of stuff, it's also measuring the value of human actions and a promise of future creativity." Technological stagnation, Graeber argued, is the result of an "increasing emphasis of the fusion of government power and financial power" and we now find ourselves "sort of locked in a structure which is inherently inimical to innovation." Thiel reiterated that changing the structure "is not the most constructive thing to be working on." Instead of joining the government machine or wasting your efforts on political activism, "if you really want to make a difference," he said naturally, "you should go to Silicon Valley."

In 2014, I visited the Center for Applied Rationality (CFAR), in Berkeley, California, an organization part of the extended network forums in which The Seasteding Institute evolves. The Center for Applied Rationality is located next door to the Machine Intelligence Research Institute[12], in the heart of downtown Berkeley. I met with CFAR's Executive Director, Anna Salamon, an ex-researcher at NASA who had purposely moved to Berkeley to work. When I asked her why, she replied "Oh I don't know, the Bay Area is just where things happen." In his ethnography of Silicon Valley, Marc Abélès (2002) writes that Siliconians "have a certitude in common: they know that they are the centre of the world. The consciousness of being pioneers

[12] Formerly the Singularity Institute for Artificial Intelligence. Peter Thiel is a general advisor at MIRI (MIRI "Team," 2015). Readers interested in AI and Silicon Valley futurism should look up Eliezer Yudkowsky and Nick Boström as well as the Singularity Summit, an annual conference organized by MIRI started in 2006 at Stanford University by Ray Kurzweil, Eliezer Yudkowsky, and Peter Thiel.

of a new era dopes the minds" (p.53). Silicon Valley localizes change within its own frontiers, where the new world is being invented, and with that "a civilizing mission for Internet emulators, imagining that the instruments they create will help change the world and solve the problems of society" (p.53). There is in Silicon Valley "a quasi-heliocentric vision of globalization, where the world economy is conceived as revolving around the California sun" (pp.52-53) and for Thiel, if before the 2008 crisis great cultural centers were where you went and "the initial groove was that you should go to Washington, DC," eventually people realized "this was not the place where we actually change things."

> Thiel: I think at this point it has shifted to Silicon Valley in a very powerful way. I think this is actually a very hopeful development. I think this is where you can make a difference, this is where you can actually change things.
>
> Graeber: Well, it is an interesting argument. I think, in terms of the larger numbers though, in term from where the profits are coming, this is largely the financial sector.
>
> Thiel: I would argue... You have to think, this is always about the future.
>
> Graeber: Absolutely.
>
> Thiel: … Where thinking will come from in the future, where do people think careers will be made in the future, where do they think they will have an opportunity to impact the world in the future. There is a way in which Google has really displaced Goldman Sachs. And again you can say you don't like Google or something but, but… it is… There is a way in which we had this enormous shift to Silicon Valley in the last 3-4 years, and again, it's… there are problems in Silicon Valley, I think we're not doing enough… but I think it is *the* place that is most about trying to do new things. That is most about trying to create new forms in our society, and so that is a very hopeful time.
>
> Graeber: I guess the question has gotta be: is Silicon Valley actually posing an alternative to that larger structure where you have a fusion of financial and security…
>
> Thiel: No, no, not really. But I would argue that, again this is my political atheism, or maybe I'm secretly working on behalf of the regime here or something like this, but hum, that is… I think a way.. hum… the thought is we're not gonna change the structure,

> we're not gonna change those things, and working on other things, you know, get companies like Airbnb, and sort of, changing some of the urban regulations, you know, things like this do shift, and the education system is gonna probably shift at some point with online courses, and, hum, and so, lots of things look like they're too small initially but I do think they can grow into things that will really change our society. This is always, why as a libertarian, I find myself working in technology rather than in politics. Because in politics, I find you have to convince too many people, like, you never convince enough people to agree with you, it is too hard.

Venture capitalism enthusiasm for small groups is an example of a larger shift toward subject-centered rather than collective structures as catalysts for change. Of particular interest here is how Thiel's discourse is representative of, and a contribution to, Silicon Valley's (a)political, postsocial ethos where "we no longer seek salvation in society but elsewhere - in the biological sciences, in financial futures, in information knowledge" (Knorr Cetina, 2005, p.3). In a way, this shift was what Graeber denounced and Thiel advocated.

Figure 1. Peter Thiel and David Graeber debating technology and the future (Source: Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times, 2014)

Palantir

Since Thiel had joked about the possibility that he might be secretly working for the regime, John Summers seized the opportunity to ask him to speak about Palantir Technologies. Thiel is a co-founder of Palantir Technologies, a data analysis company headquartered in Palo Alto and that works with the government and the finance sectors, including the CIA, the US army, the Center for Disease Control, the NSA, and JP Morgan (Burns, 2015). Graeber jumped in: "This is one thing to say 'ok we're doing something else, and we're not trying to challenge the structure,' but there is another thing to sort of using these technologies to actually reinforce that very structure." Thiel said nothing about Palantir's governmental and military contracting and swiftly shifted the topic to 9/11 and how it had led to the Patriot Act, a direct attack on personal liberty.

> There is something to be said for trying to figure out some ways to stop another attack which will be used to curtail civil liberty once more. A company like PayPal could not get started in a post Patriot Act world. Because we would have been accused of money laundering in 1999-2000 and so I do think that the fact there was no technology to stop terrorism in 2001 is what has led to [9/11].

Thiel argued that political activism's attempts at changing the structure were hopeless while at the same time, Palantir's work with government agencies could prevent events resulting in government intervention and attacks on privacy. A small high-tech, information-mining corporation, Palantir can influence the government's decisions by working in collaboration with it and can be more effective and act more rapidly as a small group of social actors than a mass of protesters. In that sense, one can understand why Thiel believes in technology rather than politics, but technology is and has always been very much embedded with politics, a point I will return to later.

Predictably, many questions were addressed to Thiel during the question period. There was a chance David Graeber would reply to your email if you wrote him. There was little chance you could address Peter Thiel directly ever again. One question referred to his Christian beliefs and how he had said in the past that Jesus was the first political atheist: "Jesus gets caught in the end. How would you say, for young innovators like us who don't want to be caught, how would you work outside the political sphere without pissing off Big Brother?" Thiel replied with

a quote from Faust, cited in his book *From 0 to 1* (2014. p.105), "where he gives his assistant Wagner advice for… Those who reveal their... feelings and passions… are crucified… and so it would be... it's always prudent not to tell everybody everything you know, unless you have perfectly conventional beliefs."[13] Indeed, especially with regards to Palantir, the audience was left with the feeling that Thiel had not said everything he knew. In fact, he had been careful not to say anything.

After the question period, people lined up at the book-signing table. Thiel signed the book I had just bought ($27 USD, paid with Visa), which is actually a version of the note-taking of Blake Masters, a student in Thiel's business course at Stanford, reviewed and edited by Thiel and the editor. More people lined up at Thiel's table and others had wine and cheese and chatted with Graeber. Both men agreed that too much government is hindering progress, that bureaucracy (more specifically, bureaucratization in the case of Graeber) is the reason for the stagnation of technological progress, and both had told the audience multiple times, as if wanting to be reassuring, that they were on the same page on these points. They diverged in their responses to it. Graeber argued that we should consider the functional and financial structures of the society. Thiel suggested we ignore the structure, act now and apologize later, "exit" the political system, and start creating things now, ideally in Silicon Valley.

In the end, it wasn't clear if this had been a debate but it had been a significant event in many ways. Even if neither man said anything new (Graeber spoke about what he had written for *The Baffler*, and, in 2012, Thiel gave a keynote address at the Nantucket Project conference (Fowler and Rodd, 2012) in which he said the same things and told the same jokes) what was unique about it was that it was unlikely to happen at all, so much so that it almost had an historical quality to it in its capture and articulation of the spirit of the age. It had been a daring attempt to measure the overlap of two worldviews at a moment in time, one libertarian and the other anarchist, by having them sit next to each other. The result was that they only collided more brutally but their common causes of concerns also made them inseparable.

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[13] *The few who knew what might be learned,*
Foolish enough to put their whole heart on show,
And reveal their feelings to the crowd below,
Mankind has always crucified and burned.

Interestingly, in its anarcho-capitalist approach to ocean colonization, seasteading merges both Thiel's political atheism and Graeber's call for change from the bottom-up, with the exceptions for the latter that it should happen in the ocean, outside the political process.

Alone together: depoliticization and post-social (actor-) network society

In an excerpt from his 2013 book *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*, published in *The Baffler* and titled "A Practical Utopian's Guide to the Coming Collapse" (2013), Graeber writes that "It's fashionable nowadays to view the social movements of the late sixties as an embarrassing failure" and how "Above all, [they] allowed for the mass revival of free market doctrines that had largely been abandoned since the nineteenth century" (para 6.) But Graeber explains how, in fact, "the antiwar movement of the sixties is still tying the hands of U.S. military planners" who, since the Vietnam War, have made concerted efforts to ensure that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were "effectively protest-proof" at home (Graeber, 2013, para. 6). "They considered it far more important to prevent effective opposition at home than to actually win the war." This raises an important question: "What happens when the creation of that sense of failure, of the complete ineffectiveness of political action against the system, becomes the chief objective of those in power?" (para. 9-10).

What novelist Jonathan Franzen (2015) has described as "the calculated demolition of faith in government" (Loc. 10104) is sometimes channeled in more subtle ways. In an article titled *The Crowdsourcing Scam* (2014), also published in *The Baffler*, Jacob Silverman reflects on how crowdsourcing benefits from the sentiment that institutional structures are failing to meet the challenges of globalization. Crowdsourced work is not the casual, liberating form of work it is supposed to be, Silverman argues: "Workers are urged to collaborate in their own deskilling, all in the name of libertarian emancipation."(para. 18) Instead, crowdsourcing is "a new pool of cheap labor where an app's terms of service agreement is the closest thing we have to an employment contract" (para. 39). Crowdsourced workers are expected to follow the command of software, which "has replaced corporate bureaucracy as the inscrutable taskmaster. It's become practically a legal entity unto itself." And software has agency: it "acts as the ultimate mediator; the employee and the employer never have to deal with one another directly."

> The field also couldn't exist without a generalized sense that liberal institutions are either in disarray or not up to tackling twenty-first century problems. In the crowdsourcing world, these challenges are inevitably cast as confusing, complicated, and amenable to technological fixes that politics or social movements can't provide.

Because crowdsourcing isolates individual instead of uniting them, Silverman concludes that there is no crowd at all in crowdsourcing (para. 29). So, as Graeber asked, what happens when the creation of that sense of failure, of the complete ineffectiveness of political action against the system, becomes the chief objective of those in power? According to Graeber and Silverman, it depoliticizes the crowd and without the possibility of political power people can hardly make decisions for themselves such as what sort of economic and governance system they should have in a free society. The counter-argument to this would be that people chose to do crowdsourced work. If political action is indeed ineffective and your voice is not being heard, your individual choices might be.

"Choice beats voice"

Crowdsourcing and seasteading are both new concepts emerging from the Austrian School and they have fully integrated the idea that the economic system of a free society is the capitalist market. This approach is also revamped and gaining in popularity through the work of other organizations, many targeting the youth, such as Students for Liberty, who are often also vocal critiques of the democratic system for oppressing minorities. In a "Seasteading Today" podcast interview with Frank Kasten, co-author of *Beyond democracy: Why democracy does not lead to solidary, prosperity and liberty but to unrest, runaway spending and a tyrannical government* (2012), Joe Quirk, TSI Director of Communications, suggests that seasteading could be "beyond democracy." Citing a post on A Thousand Nations, a seasteading-friendly, libertarian blog whose motto is "Toward a Cambrian explosion in government" (A Thousand Nations, 2015), Joe Quirk argues that our power resides "not in our ability to vote or use our voice but in our ability to choose an alternative." Frank Kasten agrees:

> The alternative to vote with our pencils is to vote with our feet, like we do in the market, every day. And it works wonderfully well. Whatever you vote for, it doesn't affect me. You're not my enemy. The discipline of the market works wonders in that way.

The idea of going "beyond democracy" deserves attention but we should be careful with categorical claims. While it is true that the Starbucks lattes others purchase do not affect me or that the food I buy does not affect them, in the grand scheme of things and in the long term, what we vote for with our dollars individually affect each of us collectively. Hundreds of documentaries, books, and reportages also document how, in a globalized society, our habits of consumption necessarily affects global human and environmental conditions and there is overwhelming evidence that our lifestyles are unsustainable. Government subsidies have also always played a major role in a market supposedly guided by an invisible hand. Finally, we should admit that the idea of *Pax Mercatus* is a fallacy: what your neighbor purchases at the grocery does not make her your enemy but the "discipline of the market" and crude oil prices have fueled many wars and made many enemies.

While their intentions are obviously not to recreate actual political conditions, in fact they would like everyone to be have more freedom of choice, Quirk and Kasten's suggestion to privilege individual choice through purchase over voice seems to deliberately ignore the fact that to those whose purchase power is limited or inexistent who happen to prefer dialogue over economic transaction as a way of expressing themselves, often the only possibility of exercising power is through raising their voices. But Quirk and Kasten's ideas are representatives of a larger trend looking for alternatives to democracy and often leaning toward extreme privatization and post-national politics, or community. Quirk's favorite example of alternative to democracy is the cruise ship:

> They're floating cities with more services than in my city that I live in right now. I've got on two of them, and I don't vote about how my cruise ship is governed, I don't vote on my cruise ship leader, I can switch and move my money somewhere else, the employees can switch and move somewhere else, and I don't have to trust the selfless motives of a cruise ship selling in the market place. I don't even have to know them, I can trust that they are self-interested in serving me better than others, competing to find new ways to get me to volunteer my dollars and my attention.

Quirk says that seasteaders believe that "choice beats voice" while democracy offers a one-fits-all system that does not do justice to the diversity of opinions. Seasteading, like cruise ships,

would allow for governance structure tailored to the needs and values of individuals, and in that sense would be "beyond democracy."

Philip Hayward (2014) makes a parallel between seasteading and eighteen century maritime pirate societies "with which they share at their core a similar vision of anarcho-syndicalism" (p.5) described by Hakim Bey (1991) in The Temporary Autonomous Zone. *In The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (2013), David Graeber, citing historian of European democracy John Markoff (1999), similarly suggests that "the typical organization of eighteenth-century pirate ships was remarkably democratic" (Loc. 2515). Pirates elected their captains, whom "usually functioned much like Native American war chiefs: granted total power during chase or combat, but otherwise treated like ordinary crewmen" (Loc. 2524). There were contractual arrangements for the shares of booty and rates of compensation in case of physical injury (Loc. 2515). Graeber defines democracy as "not even a mode of government":

> In its essence it is just the belief that humans are fundamentally equal and ought to be allowed to manage their collective affairs in an egalitarian fashion, using whatever means appear most conducive. That, and the hard work of bringing arrangements based on those principles into being. (Loc. 2603)

As he illustrated during the debate with the account of his experience at OWS, "Democracy is not necessarily defined by majority voting: it is, rather, the process of collective deliberation" (Loc. 2640). But in seasteading, the deliberation process is made by individuals who make choices and since seasteading is not about the pursuit of democracy, the comparison with the cruise ship, as exemplified in Quirk's example, seems more fitting than the comparison with pirate ships.

Graeber also compares pirate ships to the early colonies of the North American frontier:

> Frontier communities might not have been as densely populated as pirate ships, or in as immediate need of constant cooperation, but they were spaces of intercultural improvisation, and, like the pirate ships, largely lay outside the purview of any states. (Loc 2545)

Seasteading borrows from pirate ships and frontiers communities precisely to develop similar but new, technological spaces of intercultural improvisation. Veracini (2015), writing about The Seasteading Institute, argues that "the prospect of producing political change through sovereign mobility confirms a fundamentally settler colonial imagination" (p.80). But beyond

seasteading, the idea of spaces of political and economic experimentation is also growing in popularity. As mentioned in the sample letter to investors appended at the end of the *Floating City Project Report* (2014), there are "several highprofile technology billionaires in the United States [advocating] for the formation of legally independent territories to promote new economic and social opportunities" (p.46) and a growing number of technologists, such as Larry Page, former CEO of Google Inc., now CEO of Alphabet, Inc., have been calling for the creation of zones of political and technological experimentation (Ingraham, 2013). Imagination and technology might be the two elements that will define the future of governance but The Seasteading Institute isn't the first group to turn to the sea for political and legal freedom.

2

THE MEN WHO BELONGED ON EARTH AND AT SEA

There have been multiple attempts in modern history to take advantage of the political and jurisdictional status of international waters and of ships as spaces that are "out-there," away from the prying eye of the media and outside the reach of judiciary systems (Merrie and al., 2014). Recent dramatic examples include Guantanamo, an offshore "space of exception" (Bonnett, 2014), Asian ghost ships linked to the seafood trade where slaves work up to twenty hours per day, some at sea for years (Urbina, 2015) and other floating sweatshops. A different kind of use of the sea as an "outside" place is Women on Waves, an organization using a Dutch ship to provide abortion services in countries where this is difficult or illegal (Women on Waves, 2015). But from early on, attempts at taking advantage of the jurisdictional limit delimiting a country's authority over water were generally motivated by commercial interests, such as American gambling ships mooring off of the coast of California in the 1930s and, a few decades later, pirate radio ships in the United Kingdom.

This chapter looks at modern seasteading precedents in the United States and the United Kingdom. Looking at previous attempts to build countries at sea, we come to see that these are not entirely unrelated but rather are connected to each other by common concepts, shared texts, and networks of individuals. Seasteading literature branches out in two directions with texts, often self-published, promoting seasteading moral and economic qualities, and an academic critic of the hypermobility, escapism, and cosmopolitanism of wealthy modern secessionists. I then turn to the concept of flow and its different applications from a post-social perspective as I encountered them at Voice and Exit, "a conference on the future of technology, society and culture" (www.voiceandexit.com).

Sealand

Sealand has become a strong symbol of "successful" micro-nation building in the state crafting enthusiasts' community. The Principality of Sealand is an "independent state" that was established in 1967 by a retired British army major and former pirate radio broadcaster,

"Paddy" Roy Bates, on Roughs Tower, an 120-foot by 50-foot abandoned World War II antiaircraft platform located seven miles off the British coast and 60 feet above the North Sea. To bypass the BBC's legal monopoly on radio broadcasting and provide the British public with new, American sound, pirate radios broadcasted from the sea, outside the then three-mile jurisdictional limit (now 12 miles). Roughs Tower sat vacant from 1948, when it was abandoned by the British government, until the next decade when it was noticed by pirate radio Radio Caroline (Grimmelman, 2012, p.414). After a series of exchanges of control, Bates took over Roughs Tower from Radio Caroline and declared it a principality in 1967. When Radio Caroline sent a party by boat to reclaim the tower, Bates's son Michael and employee David Barron put them off with an air rifle and flaming bottles of paraffin (p.417). Despite a coup and years of legal disputes with the British government (see Grimmelmann, 2012), the Bates family remains the sole occupier of Sealand.

At Voice and Exit, "a conference exploring the future of technology, society and culture" held in Austin, Texas, in June 2015, Joe Quirk, Communications Director at The Seasteading Institute, spoke enthusiastically about Sealand as an example of lasting maritime micro-nation. It is not clear what Sealand is. Unrecognized by any other nation, Sealand nonetheless has a flag, a passport stamp, a national anthem, a coat of arms, and a motto: *e mare libertas* (From the sea, freedom). It also has a Facebook page, a Twitter account, and a YouTube channel as well as athletic teams representing Sealand in different sports competitions and, in 2008, it hosted a RedBull skateboarding event (Grimmelman, 2012, p.438). But what really put Sealand on the map was its association in 2000 with HavenCo, a would-be data haven which was supposed to be hosted on the platform (Garfinkel, 2000).

HavenCo started on the island of Anguilla, at the 1998 Financial Cryptography conference, when Sean Hastings, a cypherpunk entrepreneur, met Ryan Lackey, an "independent-minded, MIT dropout, entrepreneur and computer security professional" (Grimmelmann, 2012, p.445-448). Unfortunately for Hastings and Lackey, "There weren't, it turned out, very many customers willing to pay for the kind of regulatory arbitrage HavenCo offered. Most were better off either complying with the law or ignoring it altogether" (p.460). Another issue leading to the project's failure was that in order to avoid the application of local

law, a business "has to avoid touching ground in a jurisdiction altogether. Offshoring just the data isn't sufficient; the company has to offshore itself. Sealand was never big enough to play physical host, as well as virtual" (p.461). (Seasteads will.) Interpersonal factors led to conflict between HavenCo and Sealand and HavenCo founders were banned from the Principality. They were never reimbursed for the money invested, and according to Lackey, Sealand also kept personal computers he had brought on the platform (p.457). HavenCo's website was shut down and the company effectively "nationalized" in 2008 (p.457). The following year, Sean Hastings gave a talk on his experience with HavenCo and Sealand at The Seasteading Institute's annual conference (TSI, 2009) and he attended Ephemerisle that same year (Ephemerisle, 2015, "History").

Associate professor of law at New York Law School James Grimmelmann (2012) remarks that Sealand "exerts a magnetic pull on all those who would remake the world by standing outside of existing legal systems" (p.481). But the truth is that Sealand never was totally self-sufficient or autonomous. In fact, it would not even exist anymore without the intervention of the British government. When a serious fire broke out on Sealand on June 23, 2006, firefighters from private and environmental groups responded and a tug sprayed Sealand with water. The only person on Sealand at the time, a security guard, suffered from smoke inhalation and had to be airlifted on the mainland by a Royal Air Force helicopter. Prince Michael Bates, who had been visiting his parents in Spain, flew back to reoccupy the platform on June 25. According to Grimmelman, the damage was reported to be "estimated at half a million pounds, a number which does not include the costs of putting out the fire, for which the rescue services decided not to charge Sealand" (p.436).

Seasteading literature

How to Start Your Own Country (1999 [1979]) by libertarian, science-fiction author and improvised historian of micro-nations Erwin S. Strauss, has a long section on Sealand, pictured on its cover page. The first half of the book is a guide to start your own country and the second half is an encyclopedia of micro-nations where we learn that one early attempt to establish a new country entirely on board ship occurred in 1797, when the crews of a number of the British

ships blockading Napoleon's France mutinied, and declared themselves the Floating Republic (p.92; see also Manwaring and Dobree, 2004 [1935]). A few years earlier, in 1789, the crew of the British ship *HMS Bounty* mutinied in the South Pacific and settled in the Pitcairn Islands, still inhabited by their descendants (p.126). There were also more modest attempt at micro-sovereignty. In the mid-1960s, Leicester Hemmingway, Ernest Hemmingway's brother, built his own seastead, the Republic of New Atlantis, on an 8 foot by 30 foot barge he had towed 12 nautical miles off the west coast of Jamaica. New Atlantis' purpose was to generate money for oceanographic research by selling coins and stamps but in 1966, the micro-nation was ravaged by a storm and then ransacked by fishermen (Strauss, p.66; Hale, n.d.)

One early mention of the word seasteading can be found in *Sailing the farm* (Neumeyer, 1981). The book is a practical guide on how to survive on a "sailing homestead." Generally, homesteading is used to describe a lifestyle of self-sufficiency (Hunt, 2007) but it can also refer to "governmental policies used during periods of national expansion that allow settlers to acquire land by living on it and farming it" (Merriam Webster, "Homestead") such as the federal Homestead Act of 1862, which granted an area of public land in the West (usually 160 acres) to any citizen willing to settle on and farm the land for at least five years (Oxford Dictionaries, "Homestead"). The homesteading principle is also one of the foundation of Rothbardian anarcho-capitalism, which Murray Rothbard defines in *Confiscation and the homestead principle* (1969): "[T]he way that unowned property gets into private ownership is by the principle that this property justly belongs to the person who finds, occupies, and transforms it by his labor" (Para. 3).

Sea-steading: A life of hope and freedom on the last viable frontier (2006) is a self-published book, part practical manual, part philosophical reflection by Jerome FitzGerald, author and sailor, unrelated to The Seasteading Institute. FitzGerald also envisions self-sufficient "communities of frontiersmen" (p.xvii) on the ocean. But instead of competitive governance, FitzGerald describes his idea of a "virtuous sailboat" (p.22). His idea of seasteading is that it will most often take place near land, not in the deep ocean, and will consist of small communities living on non-motorised sailboats (p.124). FitzGerald emphasises the importance of sailing itself in the seasteading way of life: "Sailing is also a symbol of expansion and growth

at its core and carry the meaning implicit in it that we are underway towards better and greater things" (p.19). Many supporters of The Seasteading Institute have little or no sailing experience. As discussed in Chapter 4, to those who do, it makes a difference in how they think about seasteading and its potential impact on the ocean's environment.

More recently, *The Transhumanist Wager* (2013)[14], also self-published, has given a lot of visibility to its author, Zoltan Istvan, a Seasteading Institute ambassador (TSI, "Ambassadors," n.d.) and candidate to the 2016 American presidential election for the Transhumanist Party which he launched in 2014. An Indiegogo campaign allowed Istvan to tour the United States in a coffin shaped bus called the Immortality Bus (www.immortalitybus.com). In this debut novel (the back cover mentions that it has been "scorned by over 500 publishers and literary agents around the world"), protagonist Jethro Knights builds a gigantic seastead called Transhumania to promote human immortality. The construction is financed with 10 billion U.S. dollars wired to a Cayman Island donor account donated by a Russian oil magnate hoping to reunite with his deceased wife and son (p.144). Jethro Knights and his elite team of hackers and scientists select the first Transhumanians based on their shared ambition to eradicate death and together they take over the world. Humanity is forced, for its own good, to take the transhumanist wager and to adopt the Teleological Egocentric Functionalism philosophy of Jethro Knights, of which the three laws are listed at the beginning of the novel.[15] Jethro Knights, a college drop-out entrepreneur, and his small group of transhumanists have decided of the future of humanity

Throughout the book, Istvan develops the concept of "baggage culture" to describe cultural traditions and religious beliefs that keeps transhumanism from flourishing. At one press

[14] Transhumanism can be broadly defined as "the belief or theory that the human race can evolve beyond its current physical and mental limitations, especially by means of science and technology" (Oxford Dictionary, "Transhumanism"). Patri Friedman and Peter Thiel are both interested in transhumanism: Thiel has invested in a number of life-extension, DNA sequencing and genomics startup businesses and Friedman ran for candidate for the Board of Humanity+ in 2009, formerly the World Transhumanist Association. Transhumanist presidential candidate and TSI ambassador Zoltan Istvan wrote me: "I don't think transhumanism is one of the main motives for many seasteaders. But it's safe to say that they often go together. Most seasteaders are courageous people who are willing to think outside of the box. That's pretty much a good definition for transhumanists too, except they want to use science and tech to upgrade their bodies and lives. So the two have long been interconnected" (Personal communication, 12 October 2014).

[15] 1) A transhumanist must safeguard one's own existence above all else. 2) A transhumanist must strive to achieve omnipotence as expediently as possible – so long as one's actions do not conflict with the First Law. 3) A transhumanist must safeguard value in the universe – so long as one's actions do no conflict with the First and Second Laws.

conference, Jethro Knights, echoing John Perry Barlow's Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace (1996), albeit in a Teleological Egocentric Functionalist transhumanist version, proclaims:

> People of the world, do not mistake us any longer as citizens of you countries, or as participants in your societies, or as people who would consider your gods, religions, histories, and culture as something important. We are not those things. Nor are we willing to accept others' ideas of power and control over us anymore. Nor do we give a damn about your opinions, your social idiosyncrasies, your glam media, your hypocritical laws, your failing economies, or your lives – unless you can offer us something in return to make us give a damn. (p.201)

Unabashedly radical, *The Transhumanist Wager* includes a number of passages on "mass culture as a formidable enemy" (p.54). Countries, borders and history do not matter anymore: *Transhumania* conquers the planet with its military-grade technology, forcing the global population to become apolitical and acultural, a homogenous mass with one single purpose: overcoming death so that the self can live forever. To quote Jethro Knights again: "A planet's nations and its people who we live amongst are beholden to us. And not *us to it*. On Transhumania, we are all one-person universes, one-person existences, one-person cultures" (p.158). Yet, as one online reviewer pointed out, although Jethro Knights claims that history and culture are artefacts of the past and obstacles to eternal individual life, one of the first things he does on Transhumania is build "Memorial Vista," where we find him sitting next to a commemorative statue of a leading transhumanist (p.163).

Although clearly far-fetched and most likely not how The Seasteading Institute envisions seasteading, Zoltan Istvan's *Transhumanist Wager* encompasses broader themes indicative of the postsocial zeitgeist in which The Seasteading Institute was created. Many supporters of seasteading are also interested in concepts of transhumanism and self-optimization or self-enhancement. Since Zoltan Istvan is an Ambassador for The Seasteading Institute, I e-mailed him and asked if he would agree to answer a few questions. Istvan was quite busy appearing on numerous news outlets (he is a regular contributor to *Vice's Motherboard* and blogs at *Psychology Today* as well) but he did agree to answers my questions by e-mail. I learned that he became an ambassador for The Seasteading Institute after the publication of his book:

> My book became popular really quickly, becoming a #1 bestseller in Philosophy on Amazon. A lot of people read it, and eventually The Seasteading Institute made contact and we discussed a volunteer ambassador position, which is what I do for them now" (Zoltan Istvan, personal communication, 12 October 2014).

I asked him if he could tell me a bit more about the idea of destroying culture and how that could affect social cohesion:

> Transhumanism is based on wanting to improve one's life using science and technology, so ultimately, if you have a culture that is against that, then you will hinder the progress of humans. Most cultures are quite backwards--they involve unproven gods, ideologies that are anti-progress, and morals that are against human nature.
>
> I think you can destroy cultures and still keep social cohesion, so long as you replace it with something else. (Zoltan Istvan, personal communication, 12 October 2014).

The Transhumanist Wager also borrows thematic elements from Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (1996 [1957]). It is written in a similar didactic style but it reflects contemporary fears. In *Atlas Shrugged*, society collapses under the rise of People's Republics; in *The Transhumanist Wager*, society collapses under religious fundamentalism and bureaucratic dictatorship. Attractive to libertarians and conservatives, Ayn Rand's novel has seen a resurgence in popularity in recent years, notably with the production of a three-part *Atlas Shrugged* film (2011, 2012, 2014) financed by John Aglialoro, a conservative, Forbes-profiled businessman. Set in a dystopian future (in the film, 2016), *Atlas Shrugged* tells the story of the most important, wealthy industrialists of the United States, who along with a few exceptional workers and artists (a writer, a pianist) selected for their individual abilities and moral beliefs, find refuge in Galt's Gulch, a small, private community hidden in a valley in the Colorado Mountains, while the world economy collapses under socialism/communism. The novel's scenario hypothesizes that if the "real movers" (p.437) of the world decided to shrug, their disappearance would literally "stop the motor of the world" (p.609). It is interesting to note that the logo of The Seasteading Institute has been compared to *Atlas Shrugged* (Veracini, 2015), but it is also similar to the Burning Man icon.

Figure 2. The Seasteading Institute logo

Figure 3. Burning Man icon

In her novels, Ayn Rand promotes her philosophical framework, Objectivism, which she describes as being in essence "the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute" (p.1074). *How to Start Your Own Country* (1999 [1979]) lists a number of communities founded on Objectivism in the 1960s. They all had little success. Werner K. Stiefel's Operation Atlantis was an elaborate plan to develop a new nation in the Caribbean based on Ayn Rand's capitalist principles. His group first decided to build a ship but it sank in a hurricane and all their subsequent efforts failed (p.68-75). A Las Vegas real estate millionaire, Michael J. Oliver[16], tried to set up the libertarian Republic of Minerva on the reclaimed land of an artificial island in the Minerva Reefs in 1972, but he and his team were chased off by the king of neighbouring Kingdom of Tonga (p.113-123). More recently, the community of Galt's Gulch Chile (www.galtsgulchchile.com/) has had legal issues with both foreign investors and local Chileans from whom they purchased land.

[16] Not to be confused with J. Michael Oliver, who, in the late 1960s, was the editor of a libertarian newspaper, *New Banner*, and also self-published The New Libertarianism: Anarcho-capitalism (2013), an unedited version of his 1972 graduate thesis.

Libertarian scholars have written about the legal aspects of seasteading in terms of polycentric laws (Mendenhall, 2012), of flagging options (Hickman, 2012), and of international law and the Law of the Sea (Fateh, 2013). “The future of seasteading is still uncertain,” Fateh (2013) concludes, but society should “actively promote its realization: seasteading is a Darwinian choice-of-legal-regime competition that could very well result in the most efficient international community of nation” (p.33). One seasteading supporter working at the Bitcoin Embassy in Montréal, a for-profit organization promoting the adoption of cryptocurrencies, and who I interviewed, also described seasteading as a “totally Darwinian” idea. One thing everyone I spoke about seasteading with agreed on was that seasteading would be selective. Indeed, as Zygmunt Bauman writes: “Whatever else the ‘cosmopolitanism’ of the new global elite may be, it is born to be selective” (2001, p.56).

A quick Google search will list many articles and web pages mocking The Seasteading Institute’s utopian enterprise and accusing its founders of trying to create offshore havens for the super-rich. TSI has also been the topic of satirical fiction in contemporary popular culture. *In golden water: Stories from the seastead* (2011) is a collection of crowdsourced dystopian short stories mocking The Seasteading Institute published by somethingawful.com, a parody website. HBO’s television comedy series *Silicon Valley* (2014) has a character inspired from Peter Thiel named Peter Gregory. In one episode, one of the supporting characters finds himself inadvertently shipped to one of Peter Gregory’s seasteads under construction and is stuck alone for days.

Cruise ships, hypermobility and escapism

The most entertaining “seasteading stories” are perhaps those of 19th century French writer Jules Verne. *L’Ile flottante (Floating City)* (1871) tells a love story happening on a cruise ship. *La Jangada* (1881) is set on, obviously, a jaganda (a traditional fishing boat in northern Brazil) traveling down the Amazon River. *L’Ile à hélice* (*Propeller Island)* (1895) tells the story of a French string quartet touring in the United States and who, while on their way to San Diego, are diverted on Standard-Island, a man-made island propelled by 10 000 000 horse power and inhabited entirely by millionaires and billionaires. One royal couple, the retired king and queen

of the fictive country Malécarlie, lives on the island but the narrator repetitively points out that they are a lot poorer than their fellow islanders. In one example, they cannot afford to attend the quartet's concerts and must listen to the music from the street.

Standard-Island is the property of the Standard Island Company, and properties are sold or rented much like on *The World* cruise liner (see Atkinson and Blandy, 2009). The capital of Standard-Island is Milliard City, where the Milliardais, a play on the word *milliardaires* (billionaires), live the good life. The left half of the island is occupied by the Larboardites who are Protestants, and the right half by the Starboardites who are Christians. Technology on Standard-Island is much more advanced than in industrialized cities. Everything is electrified. Sidewalks are set conveyor belts and electric moons light up the sky. People communicate with the mainland using the teleautograph, a kind of fax machine connected by undersea cables. The weather is controlled and the air is distilled and electrolyzed making it healthier than anywhere else. Citizens live longer. They wear biometric devices that keep them informed on their health. While they navigate through the archipelagos of the Pacific Ocean isolated on their own motorized country, visiting islands that have been more or less ravaged by French, Spanish and English colonization, Milliardais can receive shipping of goods, including the latest European haute-couture, ordered through the teleautograph.

At one point, the island is infested with dangerous animals including lions, tigers and snakes presumably sent by the British, unhappy with the presence of Standard-Island in the international waterways. Later, it is invaded by indigenous tribes but ultimately rescued by the presence of French colonials in the neighbouring islands. When the Standard Island Company goes bankrupt, the island is bought off by the citizens (similarly, *The World* cruise ship, discussed below, was purchased by the residents). To preserve the quality of life and avoid pollution, there is no industry on Standard-Island but when the leader (the richest man) of the Larboardites decides to turn the island into a floating factory to produce and distribute salt pork across the world, he and the richest Starboardite obstinately stir the island in opposite directions until the machinery breaks apart and the island is split into pieces, the Milliardais dispersed on its floating bits and many of them drowned. This, seasteaders would say, would

never happen on a seastead. Instead, they would have split peacefully, each group pursuing its own interests.

Verne's floating cities stories were inspired from the apparition of the luxury cruise-ship which quickly became associated with the notion of a wealthy, evasive, upper class. Rowland Atkinson and Sarah Blandy (2009), a sociologist and a geographer, write about MS *The World*, a cruise liner that has been circumnavigating the globe since 2002 and offering a luxurious and exclusive lifestyle to those who can afford it. *The World* was built in Norway, sails under the flag of the Bahamas and property dealings are done under the legislation of Miami, USA, where the head office of the operator, ResidenSea, is based. According to its web site, at 644 feet, *The World* is the largest privately owned yacht on the planet. It is collectively owned by the residents, "ensuring that [their] experiences – both onboard and off – are far beyond current luxury travel standards" (www.aboardtheworld.com). Atkinson and Blandy remark that *The World* excludes those who are not able to pay but it also subdivides those who are into "residents" and "guests" so that in this exclusive community of individuals with a net worth of at least five million there is also segregation (p.102-103). Prospective purchasers are recommended to book a guest suite for a week "to give you the chance to get to know the community" (p.104). If you do, *The World*'s staff promises to offer you a privileged experience: as its website boasts "only 200 make the journey" (www.aboardtheworld.com).

Comparing cruise ships to floating gated communities, Atkinson and Blandy argue that "nomadic forms of super-affluence, flowing around a global-national urban system, have generated a form of networked extra-territoriality - a social space decoupled from the perceived risk and general dowdiness of the social world beneath it" (p.92). Their argument is aligned with Foucault's description of the ship at a heterotopia: a boat is "a floating piece of space, a place without a place that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is giver over to the infinity of the sea" (Foucault, p.9). As a heterotopia, the cruise ship functions like a mirror, like an "out-there" that is "at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there" (Foucault, p.4). Atkinson and Blandy suggest that *The World* forms a "disconnected realm, not only literally afloat, but also detached from the

reality of a world that had been strategically left behind" (p.92), and yet not quite since this new form of affluence "is at once liberated from a fixed abode yet connected to modern infrastructures of information technology, economic and wealth supply chains and social networks" (p.94).

For its *Floating City Project* (2014) report, The Seasteading Institute surveyed other current and planned semi-permanent living options, including *The World*. Lessons that can be learned from *The World* are that "investors should be prepared for the long haul" and "good management is essential and investors and owners must feel that their interests are being protected" (p.43). In a qualitative survey for which interviewees were selected "based on their previous expression of serious interest in seasteading and their ability to afford the predicted costs associated with being a resident," interviewees expressed "a general preference for a managed experience, which would leave them free to manage their own lives or businesses, and conduct pioneering experiments in a stable regulatory environment" (p.37). When asked to describe their ideal seasteads, respondents made comparisons with cruise ships and country-clubs but emphasized security, political autonomy and community (p.33-34). Anonymous interviewees described their vision of seasteading:

> "Ideal would be something that was a floating city … like a cruise ship you can to some extent forget that you are on a boat because it's so controlled and climate-optimized. It's like a floating hotel, but taking that one step further and getting to a floating city would be the ideal."
>
> "It will be the equivalent of a very high-end country club, but floating. With the added security that there's no political uncertainty."
>
> "If a seastead offered a very practical degree of independence from any of the current powers, that would be very attractive. It would make up for a lot of other shortcomings. In terms of a seastead's own governance, I'm kind of pragmatic … I am not anywhere close to desiring to live in an anarchistic society. I do mean that in the positive sense of the term. I would be happiest to see a … ideally, in a very idealistic sense, a wise use of the police power. I'd expect that there would be some governance where there was police power. There would be somebody with arms, who could stop criminals."

> "I think I am seeing it a little bit more in the lifestyle. A little bit of luxury would be kind of nice. Sort of like the first thing that swings to mind is a little bit like a vacation home to be honest with you. Somewhere where I can go and get away from society. From ordinary default reality."

Those who could afford to live on a seastead expect that experiments in governance should happen in an organized, pre-assembled, climate-optimized environment. Although The Seasteading Institute presents itself and its supporters as pioneers of a new frontier and proponents of a "Cambrian explosion in governance," these descriptions point toward an already existing consensus[17] on what kind of governance system is necessary for seasteads to be viable in the global market and this dictates how they should be managed. Steinberg and al. (2012, p.1545) identify the contradiction between the desire to a pioneer and to experiment with new ways of life and the "stable regulatory environment" required for seasteading to succeed:

> A contradiction between the desire to territorialize and deterritorialize, between the desire to establish a sustainable community and the desire to foster one that requires continual re-creation, and between the desire for pure freedom and the need for organization to achieve it. (p.1545)

Like the passengers of *Propeller Island* and *The World*, "while living in this self-contained world, endlessly sailing the high seas in a de-territorialised community" seasteaders would like to remain "highly networked" (Atkinson and Blandy, p.101). As Atkinson and Blandy remind us, "the floating world of the affluent is never fully disengaged from the social and political systems beneath it" (p.107). In fact, its very existence depends on these systems. Mobility, flexibility, and security are key. Indeed, moving to an oceanlocked platform could hardly be described as freedom.

[17] On elite consensus building, see Richardson and al., 2011.

Figure 4. A character from the television series *Silicon Valley* (2014) castaway on a seastead.

Atkinson and Blandy suggest that the possibility to purchase a lifestyle without being weighed down with property and responsibility "exemplifies a new dimension of mobility which is accompanied by a different and complex relationship to the control of territory" (p.104). The pitch line of *The World* is "Travel the world without leaving home." For those who transcend political borders and financial regulations, there is less a need to own a particular fixed place since their home has become the globalized world. It is the ability to create or extract value from the world that bestows upon them a sense of ownership or of entitlement. This is illustrated in a passage in *Atlas Shrugged* where Dagny Taggart, the main protagonist, reflects on Hank Rearden, a successful businessman and her lover:

> He belonged in the countryside, she thought – he belonged everywhere – he was a man who belonged on earth – and then she thought of the words which were more exact: he was a man to whom the earth belonged, a man at home on earth and in control. (p.334)

In *Atlas Shrugged*, the earth belongs to the entrepreneur who can extract value from its resources. Ayn Rand could not have foreseen the extent to which technology would afford a new form of mobility to the entrepreneurial elite who, instead of finding refuge in a valley hidden in the Colorado Mountains, can now find refuge in what could be called "geographies of escapism," secluded, exclusive places and spaces carefully designed around the need for

security and privacy and from where “techno-economic networks” (Callon, 1990) act in the social world.

Hypermobility does not only create a new, complex relationship to the control of territory as Atkinson and Blandy suggest; it also creates whole new territories that expand beyond political frontiers. Patri Friedman describes the “aquatory” in which seasteads will evolve:

> Aquatory is a fundamentally different medium than territory. Its fluidity greatly lowers the cost of movement. What happens if we base not just transport, but an entire society, on this fluid medium? What if we make it easy to not just move goods from one place to another but easy to move buildings from one place to another? What will that enable? Can we take globalization to the next level, from competition for goods and manufacturing to competition for good government? (Friedman, 2009b).

Seasteaders then, do not only belong on earth, but at sea, from which they hope to extract not only resources but also political value. Aquatory provides the new territory required for a new society but is also especially attractive because it promises to offer the ultimate mobility (and thus ultimate competitiveness) in terms of social and political belonging and greater freedom of choice.

In *Offshoring* (2014), John Urry cites Ronan Palan’s *Offshore worlds* (2003) on national life, “predicated on mutual responsibility, which is at the heart of the modern system of popular sovereignty,” and argues that only nation-states can bring about an effective reshoring. Urry writes that “Democracy needs its activities to be brought back ‘home’ and the interest of its citizens to be regarded as primary” (p.178-179). He concludes that “The only alternative [to offshoring] is to bring it all back home, and that must mean that home is the complex of nation-state-society. Because of the scale and power of offshoring, only the nation-state-society could be the form to which reshoring should take place” (p.182). But to the deterritorialized and hypermobile elite, home is not the nation-state-society complex anymore. The concept of society, at the heart of the nation-state, is being disassembled and reassembled and with it the concept of the nation-state. Manuel Castells (2000) argues that the new state in the

information age is not any longer a nation state but a network state.[18] "The state does not disappear, it adapts and transforms itself." To retain influence, it builds partnerships between nation-states and shares sovereignty (p.14), like the European Union or NATO. Meanwhile, for the deterritorialized elite, true freedom resides in the possibility of moving from one exclusive place to another through secure channels, and through communications technologies, of being at multiple places at the same time or, in other words, of "flowing" between places.

Flowing away

In their article on *The World*, Atkinson and Blandy (2009, p.93) draw on Manuel Castells' definition of a "space of flows" which represents "the material arrangements that allow for simultaneity of social practices without territorial contiguity" (Castells, 1999, p.295). The "space of flows" is made of a technological infrastructure of information systems, telecommunications, and transportation lines and of networks of interaction. It is also made of the habitats for the social actors that operate the networks and "electronic spaces such as websites, spaces of interaction, as well as spaces of one-directional communication, be it interactive or not, such as information systems" (p.295). In addition to the "space of flow," Castell describes the "space of places," "locale whose form, function and meaning are self-contained within the boundaries of territorial contiguity," and around which most experience and social interaction is still organized (p.296).

Atkinson and Blandy add that talk of a space of flows "also needs to encompass the shifting perception of space itself for the super-affluent and their potential for an emerging experience of a *flow of place*" (p.94). Like cruise liners, seasteads represent a step further in the creation of spaces that are "spatially embedded within, yet contractually outside many of the arrangement of state functions" (Atkinson and Blandy, p.108). Seasteads, floating pieces of space flowing on a geographically dynamic, socially secluded and politically "void" landscape, are part of the "space of flow" and outside the "space of places" but not completely disconnected. Castells (2000) predicts that

[18] The use of the term network in Castell's work does not refer to actor-network theory. John Law (2004) describes it as "as an example of the popularisation of the notion of 'network' as applied in the context of globalisation. The differences between this style of theorising and that of ANT (and after) are noteworthy" (Law, 2004).

> The geography of the new history will not be made, after all, of the separation between places and flows, but out of the interface between places and flows and between cultures and social interests, both in the space of flows and in the space of places. (p.302)

Seasteading offers to be that interface in a very literal sense.

Flow is a theoretical notion in postsocial theory and Karin Knorr Cetina (2005) explains how authors define flow differently "with concepts ranging from flow as a state of consciousness and experience to that of information as flow" (p.13). The notion of flow "captures the dynamic dimensions and temporal structuring that 'life' suggests."

> The notion of life can serve as a metaphor and anchoring concept that illustrates a cultural turn to nature and how it replaces the culture of the social. "Life" bridges divisions between the natural, the human, and the information sciences and stands for an open-ended series of phenomenological, biological, economic, and other significations and processes. (Knorr Cetina, 2005, p.12)

I encountered the concept of flow and the notion of life as described above at Voice and Exit, "a conference exploring the future of technology, society and culture" (www.voiceandexit.com), held in Austin, Texas, in June 2015. The first session was called "Seeds." "Visionary speakers" would "share the latest innovations in the areas of self, community and world." It was followed by "Sprouts workshops" in the afternoon (The Seasteading Institute's Randolph Hencken and Joe Quirk participated in a panel titled "Experimenting with Utopia: Building New Communities" and gave a workshop on building your own community) and a "Blooms schedule" in the evening with live music performance and arts exhibitors.

During the "Seeds" session, one of the speakers, Jack Kruse, a neurosurgeon and optimal health educator (www.jackkruse.com) quite famous in the nootropic community, explained how he lost weight by optimizing light magnetism to increase his "flow state" (Kruse, 2015). "Flow is a function of the environment you create for yourself" (Kruse, 2015). Kruse warns that we look too much at blue light, and especially that of our phones, computers and tablets and this destabilizes our "eye clock." "This destroys flow in all humans," Kruse said on stage. To illustrate how serious this is, he had had the lighting switched to red instead of blue for his presentation.

> People have been habitualized into believing all progress and technology has a positive connotation these days. Might this belief be obstructing the view point of nature, in the game of life? Blue light at the wrong time destroys flow and you cannot flourish. (Kruse, 2015)

The underlying idea is that individual life can be optimized by controlling one's environment and tailoring it to one's genetics and physiological needs to reach a state of optimal performance. Kruse concluded his presentation by showing the audience a quantum device delivering radio-frequencies to control body temperature that he wore on his wrist. He hoped to launch it on the market soon.

Jamie Wheal from the Flow Genome Project offered a more phenomenological depiction of flow, but here too "life" blurred the distinction between consciousness, biology and economics. The Flow Genome Project is "a trans-disciplinary, international organization committed to mapping the genome of Flow by 2020 and open sourcing it to everyone" (www.flowgenomeproject.co). Its web site describes the Flow State:

> *Flow states, peak experiences, in the zone, runner's high, being unconscious*—the lingo is endless. The experience though lives up to the hype. **Time slows down, self vanishes, there's a complete merger between action and awareness**— it almost sounds like nonsense, but fifty years of serious research says otherwise. Flow states are now known to optimize performance, enhance creativity, drive innovation, accelerate learning, amplify memory and underpin happiness itself. (Original formatting.)

"We're making a leap," Wheal said on the stage, "from mythology to psychology to biology." His presentation covered how precognition and biometrics can be used to calculate team bonding and maximize the chances of success to find emergent leadership but also to predict to which philanthropic organization individuals are most likely to make donations to.

In his book *The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Optimal Human Performance* (2014), Flow Genome Project co-founder Steven Kotler explains how the study of action and adventure sports athletes can help us understand the science of flow, "in which we perform and feel our best" (Kotler, 2013) so that everyone could access a an optimal state of consciousness and reach ultimate human performance. Flow is "a heightened state of decision making, it's near-perfect decision making" and a driver of innovation (Kotler, 2013). If we could decode how flow works, we could apply this knowledge across all domains and in some cases

"double workplace productivity" (Flow Genome Project, 2014). But most of all, flow is about self-enhancement, hyped productivity and the creation of an optimal self. "If you don't make the switch," Wheal warned the audience at Voice and Exit, "you're falling behind the evolutionary curve."

Self, Community, World

Before the speakers' presentations began, two large screens on each side on the scene had played a visual recording of the shape of a woman's face on a digital grid with an audio soundscape weaving in "sounds that feel organic with electronic (blend of a spiritual vibe with electronic/future)" (V&E 2015):

> My name is Theta. I'll be your guide through this experience. Please don't be unsettled by my appearance. Given the technology of your time, it is the best I could do. I am here because I have been invited, strange as that may seem. You are here because you know something others don't. You start by asking the question: How am I to live? You ask because you think life has much more to offer. And you are prepared for answers that might be a little unsettling to others in this era. The history of our species includes dark chapters, growing pains, and challenges. Many human problems persist. But there is cause to be hopeful. Great unlocked potential lives inside you. And that is one reason we're here. Another is that the future is full of surprises. You've come because, even though none of you can say what the future holds, you believe in the power of the human spirit. When people are free to create, to connect and to collaborate, good things flow. Humanity flourishes. But let us not be passive about tomorrow. It is ours to create. How do I know? Because I live in that future.

Theta told the audience that she had come to introduce "some of the catalysts for this vector": "Your challenge will be to see how their messages can be integrated...how they can inspire discoveries along the dimensions of Self, Community and World." A timer appeared on the screens and the audience was invited to synchronize breathing. Then Theta concluded:

> We are most pleased with this transmission, and can sense your openness. But I should tell you: this "group" that I spoke of...these pioneers of the human spirit...they are sitting in this very audience. It is nice to see all of us together again in our nascency. From this small

> constellation of minds, a brighter future awaits. It's up to us to make it. Hold this inspiration, nurture it, and let it guide you...All you have to do… (distortion).

By introducing the participants to themselves as pioneers of the future the conference was designed to reinforce their conviction of being part of "The few who knew what might be learned" and to transform them into active agents of change. Through the various presentations and workshops, participants would develop the tools for self-optimization and self-enhancement and on the last day, they were invited to put into practice the strategies learned at the conference: health optimization, visualization, turning failure into success, imagining new (seasteading) communities and new modes of management. Self, community, world were key terms. There was no talk of the nation-state, everyone wanted to act locally and think globally. And this began with a better, optimal self.

The gift bag at Voice and Exit included dietary supplements with names like Unfair Advantage™ and Brain Octane designed to enhance mental performance and brain cognition. I tasted the famous Bulletproof Coffee, "the unofficial beverage of Ephemerisle" (Abrahamian, 2013), consisting of a "blended up mix of Upgraded Coffee, Brain Octane Oil, and unsalted grass-fed butter" (Bulletproofexec.com, 2015), and was handed a flyer of Whole Food's John Mackey's non-profit, Conscious Capitalism, Inc. Voice and Exit invited its participants to "criticize by creating" and everything in the presentations and the promotional material praised competitiveness and celebrated the Age of the Entrepreneur which Reagan has declared three decades ago but only really seemed to be happening now, in this hangar in Austin, Texas.
One participant told me he particularly appreciated the large, open space of the venue and how the furniture was disposed to encourage interaction and create a sense of community: gigantic swings to sit on, bean bag chairs, sponsors and demos tables on one side on the room, and a mix of electronic music with a spiritual vibe to create an ambiance. Another participant told me he attended events like Voice and Exit expressly to meet people who thought like him, that he "needed this," and that he found the communal aspect of the conference very resourceful and encouraging. The website of Voice and Exit invites visitors to "Join the Exiter Community" to sign up for the newsletter and to have access to the manifesto. A community is already waiting

outside the structure, a community where self, a better self, and world, a better world, are interconnected.

In a subsequent Skype interview with British academic Dylan Evans, who gave a talk on how to turn failure into success and spoke about his newly published book *The Utopia Experiment* (2015), I expressed my surprise at how no one questioned the ideas advanced except during the question period of the "Experimenting with Utopia" session when one woman asked about the colonial aspect of seasteading. Evans agreed that this was not the most "intellectually rigorous" type of conference but he did very much enjoy participating to it and meeting with a diverse crowd of people working for a better future for humanity. He is currently writing a book titled: "Beyond democracy: How voting with our feet can make the world a better place" (Evans, forthcoming).

3

"THE NEXT NEW WORLD"

Events like Voice and Exit and movements like The Seasteading Institute see technology and mind as foundations of a new society. So did the back-to-landers of the sixties, which Fred Turner (2006) describes as "those who saw the transformation of consciousness as the basis for the reformation of American social structure" and calls the "New Communalists" to differentiate them from the New Left. The New Left "did what insurgent political movements have often done: they wrote statements, formed parties, chose leaders, and marched" and generally "turned outward, toward political action" (Loc. 564). For the New Communalists, on the other hand, "political activism was at best beside the point and at worst part of the problem" and "the key to social change was not politics, but mind" (Loc. 564, 570). In the same way, for techno-libertarians and seasteading pioneers of the "Next New World" (TSI, "About," n.d.), the key to social change is not traditional "folk" activism (Friedman, 2009) but escaping politics altogether by creating brand new spaces of experimentation. The key to social change is the mind but even more so technology which, as Patri Friedman (2009) argues, "is much more effective than rhetoric in changing the mind."

We might be tempted to see the American countercultural movement of the sixties as a rejection of the Cold War, but Turner (2006) explains how, in fact, as they set up intentional communities and communal farms, the back-to-landers imported with them tools and epistemologies that had been developed in large part by the governmental-military-industrial complex (Loc. 529-530), turning, like Peter Thiel, to "technology instead of politics." Today, the same dystopian fears of global warming and war that marked the sixties and seventies still loom at the horizon, but along with a renewed, deeper concern about the loss of privacy and the threat of unfriendly artificial intelligence. In going back to the land and using small-scale technology and tools, the New Communalists hoped to "rediscover what they imagined to be pre-industrial forms of intimacy and egalitarian rule" (Turner, 2006, Loc. 580-582), or "what they imagined could become a new nation, a land of small, egalitarian communities linked to one another by a network of shared beliefs" (Locations 523-524). There is a parallel to be made with seasteading,

whose aquapreneurs and seavangelists also looking to create new communities linked by a network of shared beliefs in which they could rediscover the Romantic ideal of the small, pre-industrial society. This chapter discusses experiences of self, community and the idea of a "permanent future" (Niedzviecki,2015) at Ephemerisle, an annual volunteer-run seasteading festival.

All good things are wild and free

Since attending the Burning Man[19] festival in 2000, Patri Friedman imagined creating a water festival called Ephemerisle as a seasteading experiment and temporary autonomous zone. Friedman was able to start the Ephemerisle festival in 2009 and since 2010, the event has been annual and community-run. It is a one-week aquatic gathering entirely organized by seasteading enthusiasts and volunteers. In July 2014, I was able to attend Ephemerisle by replying to a post on the Facebook page of the event. Max, an engineer in his late twenties, was looking for people to share the houseboat he had rented. He quickly replied to my message and suggested that we speak on the phone. He asked me what I did in life (student), if I had traveled before (yes), if I had experience in similar events such as Burning Man (no), and agreed to rent me a bunk bed. I wired him the money via PayPal, and via an e-mail thread, crew members introduced each other and we organized our four-day stay on the Sacramento Delta, near Mandeville Tip.

Many Ephemerisle participants rent small houseboats at the nearby marina but some come on their own sailboats or even inflatable boats. The houseboats are decorated and are arranged in small stationary islands with various names such as Titan Island, Eyeland, Miniocracy and Cuba. The boat I stayed on was part of Titan Island, the "authoritarian party island" (Jackish, 2014, para. 2). Participants build plywood paths and platforms and Ephemerisle becomes a tiny temporary archipelago in the middle of the San Joaquin River. Brian Doherty, editor of the well-known libertarian publication Reason magazine and author of the impressive book Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian

[19] Burning Man is an annual event held in Nevada's Black Rock Desert. "It is a temporary metropolis dedicated to community, art, self-expression, and self-reliance." (http://burningman.org/event/)

Movement (2008), has written multiple articles on The Seasteading Institute. Doherty attended Ephemerisle in 2009 and in Jason Sussberg's Ephemerisle documentary (2009), Doherty explains that Ephemerisle is most likely not a precursor to seasteading since it is has no economic activity and nothing to make it viable. Nonetheless, Ephemerisle attracts a growing number of participants each year and makes The Seasteading Institute known. The year I went, between 150 and 200 people attended the event, the majority white male adults from the Bay Area, many working in the tech industry. Of the ten people staying on our houseboat we were three women.

Ephemerisle is also an occasion for like-minded people, many of them also Burning Man participants, to experiment with society assemblage. It mixes leisure and post-political activism, for lack of a better word to describe activism against political activism, and reunites a crowd of people with a similar desire to escape the conventions of society for a few days in order to better experience community and community building. Ephemerisle, Burning Man or the communes or the sixties, all meant to be spaces of freedom and experimentation away from the pressure of social normativity and of occasions for transformative experiences. Scott Jackish (2014), who attended Ephemerisle the same year I did, details his experience in a post on his blog The Oakland Futurist:

> Overall, I was deeply impacted by my experience at Ephemerisle. It certainly far surpassed any expectations I had about Comfort Zone Expansion. I came out of it with a renewed interest in intentional communities, a newfound love of boating, a new favorite musical genre (ElectroSwing!), a whole plethora of new ideas to explore, a greater capacity to gracefully deal with public nudity, and really many new social connections, because I met some amazing people that I look forward to getting to know better in the future. I want to extend many thanks to all of the people who worked so hard to make this event happen, it really was a transformational experience for me.

Aside from the evening parties, the high point of Ephemerisle is an afternoon of speaker series called "Memocracy"[20] where anyone can talk about any subject for 10 to 15 minutes, a concept similar to TED Talks. A young woman spoke about René Girard's (1923-2015) mimetic theory

[20] My host in San Francisco, who happened to be taking a Greek language class at university at the time, insistently pointed out to me, incredulous, that "Memocracy is not a word."

which argues that all of our desires are borrowed from other people, that all conflicts originates in mimetic rivalry, and that the scapegoat mechanism, which Peter Thiel (2014) writes about in his book *0 to 1* (p.181). Mimetic theory argues that religion was necessary in human evolution to control the violence that can come from mimetic rivalry. “Girard interpreted the Bible as a gradual revelation of the injustice of human violence. The culmination, Jesus's crucifixion, is unprecedented not because it pays a debt humans owe to God, but because it reveals the truth of all sacrifice: the victim of a mob is always innocent, and collective violence is unjust” (imitation.org, “Brief Intro,” n.d.). Peter Thiel, René Girard and Christian theologian Robert Hamerton-Kelly have co-founded Imitatio, a programme of the Thiel Foundation and an organization dedicated “to press forward the consequences of René Girard’s remarkable insights into human behavior and culture” (Imitatio, “About,” 2015).

Max, the captain of our boat, was a self-taught engineer who now worked on space-bound rockets. During Memocracy, he spoke about resource scarcity and peak oil and pointed out that seasteads will need massive desalination plants. He suggested that nuclear energy could be used instead of petroleum. Then a woman wearing the bottom half of a bikini and a pāreu around her waist gave a demonstration on how to self-massage. Philip, also staying on my boat and also a brilliant young scientist with already a couple patents to his name, talked about a psychology experiment which showed how when you have many things taking up your attention, then the decision-making in your brain is done by the primitive instinctual area instead of the high-reasoning part. The implication is that people should intentionally remove themselves from the normal busy routine of life (for example by attending Ephemerisle) when they have a major decision to make, because you will make a better decision. Another presentation was about how to use self-branding to overcome shyness and meet new people.

Scott Jackish (2014) also recalls the presentations of Dan Dascalescu, co-founder of seasteading offshoot Blueseed, about a blood work service called Inside Tracker that recommends optimal supplementation based on your actual nutrient levels and “A fellow from Honduras was promoting the opportunities for libertarians to experiment with new forms of government in Honduras’ new autonomous free trade zones” (Para. 12). There was also poetry

reading, a culinary contest, and a meditation platform, one of the most popular art work that year. Like at Burning Man, Ephemerisle participants create impressive art work.

Figure 5. Arrival at Titan Island. Photo credit: P. Anderson

Figure 6. The cube ship, built and dismantled on site. Photo credit: P. Anderson

Figure 7. Memocracy speaker and audience. Photo credit: P. Anderson

Figure 8. Photo credit: P. Anderson

Figure 9. Photo credit: P. Anderson

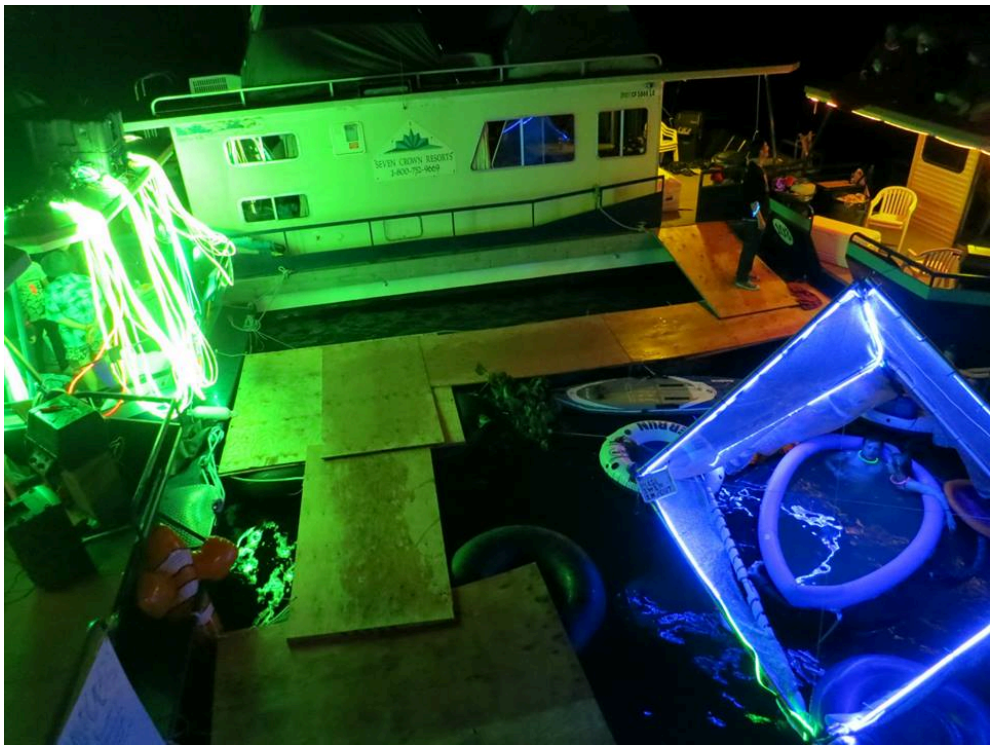

Figure 10. Photo credit: P. Anderson

Figure 11. Photo credit: P. Anderson

Figure 12. Photo credit: P. Anderson

Randolph Hencken, TSI Executive Director, told me that some of the most interesting people he met, he met them at Ephemerisle. The year I went, there were rumors about a Bitcoin millionaire being present. Two persons staying on my boat worked at a space exploration company. Another had left the tech world and opened a bar. One woman worked in special effects, another attended CalTech. A young man all dressed-up in camo who had come alone on an inflatable boat he had purchased on Amazon, which he took great pride of having assembled by himself, and who told me he had attended a "wizard school" (I never could figure out what it was and he would not provide further explanation) also invited me to visit the "startup mansion"[21] where he lived. One man wore a tiny camera around his neck that recorded his life, one aspect of a practice called "lifelogging." Everyone shared a common interest in technology but only a few of the participants were experienced sailors. One man, Curt, who although he was not attending Ephemerisle dropped by every year to recruit tourists to visit his own "seastead," was one of them.

Seasteaders and survivalists

In the late morning of the third day we sat in small groups, still recovering from the previous night, while others slept on the roofs of the boats, protected from the sun by makeshift tents. Someone was walking from boat to boat offering bacon. Philip and I were sitting on the front deck of our houseboat talking about his job heading a research team working on space exploration and Mars colonization when Adele, also from our crew, jumped on the deck and asked us if we wanted to check out an abandoned ship. We agreed without hesitation and went to get the others inside the houseboat. We needed enough life vests for all of us (the coastguards circled Ephemerisle every day, an ironic reminder of the existence of the state, but never approached us) so we borrowed vests from our houseboat and walked through other houseboats' decks and a catamaran to reach Curt's small motor boat. After brief introductions and handshakes with Curt whom Adele had also just met, we hopped aboard and departed from Titan Island.

[21] Startup mansions are places where people, often young men, working on a common start-up project live and often work together. Sometimes the owner of the house agrees to let them stay for free in exchange for royalties or a percentage of the sale of the finished product, as is shown in the television series *Silicon Valley* (2015).

The boat jumped on the waves and Curt, despite the fact that it was just a small boat, skillfully steered it. He was in his mid-sixties and, a ship captain all his professional life, he now had the wrinkled face and the tanned skin of captains on cough drops advertisements. His strong features formed complicated, serious expressions and he smiled at the end of each sentence as in a deliberate attempt to be confusing and mysterious. Ten minutes later we were approaching two massive steel ships and a slightly smaller one anchored near the bank. Curt owned two of them, one of the big ships and the smaller one. Titan Island suddenly seemed very small compared to Curt's biggest ship and the cramped space of our houseboat was a bad joke compared to a deck with a helicopter landing (which had been replaced with a crane strong enough to lift the smaller ship). We sailed past the third ship. Two men on deck waved their arms to signify that they did not like us being so close. "Germans, Curt said. These guys… they're always complaining."

To get aboard Curt's biggest ship, we had to climb an old rope ladder. Curt waited to grab our hand and help us to the last step up. The ship, it turned out, was not totally abandoned since Curt lived on it. For a long time a museum ship, it had been put for sale by the U.S. government and Curt had bought it for "many hundreds of thousands" dollars. In the cabins, decorated with nautical theme paintings, beds with disparate beddings seemed ready to welcome anyone. Literature on topics covering tax avoidance, government criticism and nautical life scattered around the ship testified of Curt's affinities with the more libertarian seasteading supporters. On the kitchen counter there were tiny containers of spices and vitamins, organic fruits and vegetables, and an unopened bottle of really old scotch standing next to cheap wines all covered with a fine layer of dust. I asked Curt his occupation. He smiled and said "I do whatever I can to make money." I must have looked puzzled because he immediately went on: "I am a marine consultant." During the guided tour he would personally give us, we would learn that he sometimes rented the ship to people who hosted rave parties. This explained the random foam swords on the floor and the strange goat mask we found in one closet. In the engine room, we found a pair of handcuffs on a shelf, another artefact of the rave parties. But this one had caused Curt troubles and he told us the following story.

One night, Curt was in a bar and happened to chat with a man who was interested in ships. Curt offered to give him a tour just like he did for us. As Curt showed him the engine room, the man found a pair of handcuffs, the same pair we were looking at and that Curt had obviously not judged necessary to move. In Curt's captain cabin was a picture of his daughter looking at him through a hole made by rust in a piece of steel. This picture too was still hanging on the wall when we visited. We only saw the rusted steel and a girl's face peering through the hole and at the bottom of the picture a Photoshopped inscription: "I promise I'll be good Daddy."

> So anyway, the guy saw the handcuffs and the picture and he thought I had hostages, and he called the FBI, where he knew someone. So if you see broken doors, it's the FBI. I was not here when they came, and they don't bother knocking. I fixed some of the doors. You'll see. The wood is different. The doors they broke were the original doors.

Curt told us that he "knew someone too," and the matter was quickly dropped. He told this story with the natural ease of someone who has told a story multiple times. The artefacts left in place gave him the opportunity to retell the story which was ultimately about the power of the American government to interfere in citizens' private lives, and which, in a way, confirmed Curt's decision to live on a ship of his own. That he had not moved the contentious object was also a statement that he was not going to let himself be intimidated by the FBI.

Living alone on his ship, Curt was somewhat of a survivalist. Survivalists, also known as "preppers," share with seasteaders a distrust of government and a desire to use and adapt technology to develop self-reliance outside mainstream society. Hal Niedzviecki (2015) writes that "Not unlike the Silicon Valley elite," survivalist share a "rhetoric of self-reliance, the self-fulfilling prophecy of institutional ineffectuality, and an enthusiasm for all things gadget, especially those things that supposedly enable people to solve their problems themselves" (p.250). Niedzviecki argues that "at their core," both the techno-optimist and the doomsday prepper movements share "a secular belief systems rooted in a sense of superiority over others. Both have a lifestyle of products and gatherings revolving round the endlessly arriving future" (p.250). But both groups have a different approach to the imminent future. Techno-futurists "argue that the more things fall apart, the more they can be (and are being) put together again better than before" (Niedzviecki, 2015, p.251). Survivalists, in contrast, are not looking for

progress but for "a return to a mythical time long past when things were simple, [….], when people, or even a people, stood on solid ground, in control of their destiny" (p.251). Survivalists, Niedzviwcki argues, have taken on the "real toll" of the notion of a "permanent future" since they have lost "their ability to believe in progress at all" (p.251). Seasteading contains elements of techno-futurism and survivalism. Ephemerisle, in particular, is one attempt to return to a "mythical past" and an idealized neo-primitive community taking control of its destiny. But survivalists foresee a dystopian future, while seasteaders imagine a future where technology bring prosperity, health and redemption at all once. As Niedzviecki writes, "It all comes back to hope, or in this case, the false hope of technological redemption and/or redemption through the premise of collapse then return" (p.254).

Freedom is something you take

At Ephemerisle, one woman distributed temporary tattoos. One said "Freedom is something your take" (www.tattly.com). Ephemerisle aims to recover a fictional past and community felt to be loss and and to reappropriate the freedom to imagine and to be creative, the same creativity Graeber describes as having been neutralized by the functional society. On his blog The Oakland Futurist, Scottt Jackisch, (2014), who had recently attended a seminar at the Centre for Applied Rationality in Berkeley, described how the nautical landscape of Ephemerisle provided a particular setting for humans to come together and was "enjoyed socially":

> When I woke up each day, I would go forth in search of caffeine and bacon, and, lo and behold, I was surrounded by other folks doing exactly that same thing. I am used to quiet mornings by myself shuffling around my apartment making my own tea and breakfast while by girlfriend snoozes away in the bedroom. But mornings on Ephemerisle were communal affairs. I saw others around me pursuing the same morning goals and it felt … comforting. Modern life is so isolating with each little nuclear family tucked away, separate from all the others. It's a warm, inclusive feeling to share experiences with your neighbors. Each evening at sunset, the entire population of Titan was up on the roofs of the houseboats, taking in the beautiful view, enjoying the golden hour together, socially. It felt really natural and compelling. We humans probably evolved in little groups about this size, and I love the neo-paleo idea of intentional communities like this. We need

> to bring back the village and the shared community. But these should be communities of choice rather than the forced obligation of villages in the past. (Jackish, 2014)

Jackish appreciated the shared experiences of the small community at Ephemerisle which allowed him to get a sense of experiencing a community assemblage that "feels really natural and compelling" and he hypothesizes that humans evolved in small groups. The "neo-paleo idea" of small, intentional communities based on common interests is comforting and offers an experience of rediscovery of time as well as an occasion to celebrate the future. Ephemerisle and seasteading, like the commune of the sixties, turn to technology to develop self-reliance and mix techno-optimism and a desire to return to a more "primitive" form of community. Paradoxically, the "return" to an idealized anterior form of community can only be realized in a state of "permanent future," an "ideology of future-first" as described by Niedzviecki (2015, p.259). The "blank canvas" of the ocean's "aquatory" can afford the ultimate mobility and transcendence of place, space and politics.

Not every year was equally successful for Ephemerisle, and not everyone had such a good time as Jackish. Atossa Abrahamian (2013) recalls her own experience at Ephemerisle in June 2013, the year prior Jackish and I attended. It was an unlucky year for Ephemerisle as storms practically dismantled the installations:

> On Saturday morning, I woke up at sunrise after having slept on a foldout bench in the front section of our houseboat. The wind had picked up dramatically overnight, and when I stepped onto the deck for some fresh air I nearly lost my balance. Over the next four hours, the gusts proceeded to tear the floating cities apart. The platforms rocked on the water and the inflatable rafts tied to our boat now blew violently onto our deck, knocking over chairs and crashing into the doorframe.
>
> I watched from my boat as the islands deteriorated in slow motion. First, the North side rotated 90 degrees; then, it began to lose chunks of its main platform, one by one. The South began to wobble precariously, and a few rugged types who'd taken charge of the situation were yelling orders at each other from their decks and frantically Tweeting alerts to other islands. The turquoise toenail polish the men had applied the day before sparkled on their bloodied feet as they attempted to untangle rogue anchors from the riverbed and fold up the Cuddle Gallery, which was on the verge of blowing away.

Brian Doherty, Editor of Reason magazine, shared the article on Reason's website (2013, June 11) and described it as "Overall, an interesting and mostly fair account from a thoughtful normal person taking a look at a world they are not sympathetic with, but can try to understand." To Abrahamian, Ephemerisle "billed itself as a 'gathering of people interested in the possibility of permanent experimental ocean communities,' but felt more like Burning Man, if Burners frolicked in the tears of Ludwig Von Mises." She also describes it as "a vision straight out of Neal Stephenson's cult sci-fi novel Snow Crash." Part of the action in Snow Crash (1992) takes place on a cult leader's raft, a floating refugee camps made up of boats, rafts, and anything that floats tied together. Neal Stephenson's cyberpunk fiction is very popular in Silicon Valley. A required reading among the founders of PayPal was Cryptonomicon (1999), a cult novel among hackers, which imagines an anonymous internet banking system using electronic money (Brown, 2014).

The contrasts between Abrahamian and Jackish's experiences shows how to appreciate Ephemerisle and the transformational experience of the festival, one must share its mindset and the weather and material conditions must meet certain standards. On the last morning, despite the comforting communality of Ephemerisle, we woke up eager to leave. One can only spend so much time on an overpopulated manmade islet and still find it enjoyable. We snacked on leftover apple pie as we cleaned the boat. The dance platform had lost half its size already, and we wondered how the cube ship would be dismantled. We waved to the other Ephemerislers as our houseboat backed away from Titan Island. Fifteen minutes later, as we approached the marina, we noticed that an animated crowd, composed mostly of pockets of excited teenagers, was occupying the dock. The Sonshine Ministries, a non-profit, specialized camping Christian summer camp was getting ready for departure.

Teenagers came from all over the United States to attend this event and every time a new coach arrived, a group of Sonshine teen boys ran toward it waving a large American flag. A pregnant fifteen-year-old walked past our boat surrounded by girlfriends and a dolphin mascot volunteered to take one final picture of our tired crew standing on the front deck of our houseboat. Sonshine boys and girls were assigned different boats which had been christened variously according to biblical or American geographical inspiration, and they would go on occupy a spot in the San Joaquin River for a week. For the Sonshine Ministries, the Delta

provides “a captive audience for a week” and the houseboats “lend themselves to a relational approach to ministry”:

> Each day is very full and very relational. Only on houseboats do the words of the early believers come alive... “And they continually devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe...and all were together and had everything in common.” (Acts 2:42-44)

Here too, as in Jackish’s description, is an idealized early small-scale community made possible by the physical location of the event and the space of experimentation offered by the houseboats. Zygmunt Bauman (2001) writes that “Community stands for the kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us – but which we would dearly wish to inhabit and which we hope to repossess” (p.3). Sonshine teenagers come from the same modern, isolating world that Jackish describes. For them as well, creating small, floating, intentional communities allow meaningful relationships to develop rapidly and bestow attendees with a sense of being part of something greater. Our own secular authoritarian island, now dismantled, and the houseboats’ decks on which large plastic bags filled with empty beer cans piled up, greatly contrasted with the departing vessels of the young and eager campers. Nevertheless, the Sonshine teenagers and we had come to the Delta waters in search of a similar liberty to experience community-building and imagine a different world.

4

IS SEASTEADING FOR YOU?

The Seasteading Institute has been accused of wanting to create offshore havens for uber rich libertarians (Sydell, 2012) but in the *Floating City Project Report* (TSI, 2014), to the question "What is the MOST you would spend on a unit," a majority of respondent to the survey said they would pay the lowest price in the multiple choice answers, $500 to $600 by square foot, followed closely by those who could not afford those prices (*Floating City Project* Report, 2014, p.14). A significant amount of respondents indicated they were students, and nearly 30% of respondents were between 18 to 23 year old. The Report remarks that "While it's unlikely that students will be early investors in the development of a floating city, it is heartening to know that the vision of the Floating City Project resonates with college-aged people" (p.19). Regarding the reasons to live on a seastead, "opportunity to experiment with new governance" came first, followed by "desire to pioneer a new way of life." "Commercial advantages of conducting an offshore enterprise" was third, followed by "preference for small communities," "love of the sea," "solitude," and "other."

This chapter introduces seasteading supporters and shows that idea of post-national or post-political communities, new ways of life and news forms of governance based on technology, reach out to more people than just rich technocratis. They each imagine seasteading somewhat differently and their own conceptualizations bring forward important questions about seasteading and secessionism. These narratives also all evoke the need for new forms of society more apt to respond to today's reality of hypermobile, hyperconnected global citizens.

She steads

Women represent a minority within the seasteading movement and when I asked Randolph Hencken, TSI's Executive Director, if he knew women who would accept to discuss seasteading with me, he suggested that I try to contact Brit Benjamin, Patri Friedman's partner. This came as a bit of a surprise as Randolph has told me that he could not get me an interview

with Patri Friedman, who was too busy, and I expected Brit Benjamin to be just as inaccessible. But when I emailed her to explain my project and ask if she would agree to answer a few questions she immediately agreed.

Brit Benjamin is a law student a songwriter. The title of this dissertation is taken from one of her songs (2011). Brit went to UC Berkeley and majored in Interdisciplinary Studies where she wrote her undergrad thesis on women and compared the family policies and statutes related to women in the United States, U.S.S.R., and Nazi Germany in the 1930s-1950s. She found that "each of these states, ostensibly a different form of government, treated women nearly identically, especially during wartime, and that the propaganda directed at women as a class was meant to discourage market participation by women" (Brit Benjamin, personal communication, 27 July 2014). Through her research, Brit came to believe that

> the control and subordination of women is an essential function of nearly all existing forms of governance, even those with substantially egalitarian laws. Governments purchase female buy-in through implementing social services, allegedly for the benefit of women, but which have the effect of aggregating control over women's choices by a male-majority governing body. (Brit Benjamin, personal communication, 27 July 2014)

After graduating, Brit moved to Orléans, France, for about a year during which she taught English at several inner-city type schools, but only for approximately six weeks because Orléans was on strike about pensions and education reform so the schools were frequently closed due to strikes. During that time, she felt "like a walking target for sexism in France" (Brit Benjamin, personal communication, 27 July 2014). After being "chased home by two men with broomstick," (Brit Benjamin, personal communication, 27 July 2014), an experience she wrote a song about, she abandoned her "idealistic views of a more female-friendly Europe." Brit traveled around Europe for several weeks by trains, "seeing country after country with just more of the same governance experience." By the end of her trip, Brit was "over it" and decided to come home (Brit Benjamin, personal communication, 27 July 2014).

People frequently assume that Brit Benjamin became involved with seasteading because she is romantically involved with Patri Friedman. That is not the case. In fact, Brit and Patri "regularly disagree about the best path forward for seasteading and on all sorts of governance issues" and Brit sometimes tells him that her mission is to "smash the 'PATRIarchy' and to

watch out" (Brit Benjamin, personal communication, 27 July 2014). Upon her return to the United States, Brit heard about The Seasteading Institute from her close friend Charlie Deist, a Seasteading Ambassador, who told her TSI was looking for an administrative assistant.

> Making new societies with new forms of governance as the source code excited me so much! It still does. I applied. I was hired. I was the only female at TSI for the majority of my time working there and I didn't date Patri until much later. (Brit Benjamin, personal communication, 27 July 2014).

Brit wrote me that the experiences above primed her for an interest in seasteading, and the longer she researches, the more she is sure that "women, more than any other group on this planet, need to engage with competitive governance and to build new societies that are not premised on their subordination" (Brit Benjamin, personal communication, 27 July 2014). She believes that without women's involvement in seasteading, the project will fail at making a difference: "if women do not capitalize on the opportunity, seasteading is unlikely to be a solution to any feminist issues, aside from generally offering more libertarian / anarcho-capitalist governance options," which she believes is generally better for women (Brit Benjamin, personal communication, 27 July 2014).

Brit's narrative and her vision of seasteading as a venue for women emancipation goes against the idea of seasteading as a refuge for white male billionaires. It raises attention to the participation of women in seasteading, something that generally goes unmentioned, and also points to anarcho-capitalism as a potential political and economic avenues, new frontiers for women to explore. Giving women the same access to the market that men have, instead of creating social services that Brit says are targeting, but not empowering, women, would have more beneficial effects and would give women more liberty and opportunity to make their own choices. But Brit concluded her email to me with a warning: "seasteading is an opportunity, not a cure-all."

Who will get the golden ticket?

Brit was optimistic about the prospect of seasteading provided it included women's participation. No one else I interviewed mentioned concerns about gender equality but almost

everyone raised questions about the delicate issue of inclusion and exclusion. I met Adam on my second day at Ephemerisle when he joined our crew. He was a friend of Max, the captain of our houseboat. Adam lived in Los Angeles and worked for his father's real estate management company but his true passion was music. We were sitting on the stern end of the boat and listening to his most recent, futuristic-themed electronic music album when he asked me what I thought about the "singularity." The technological singularity is a hypothetical event, a change caused by "the imminent creation by technology of entities with greater than human intelligence" (Vinge, 1993). "This change will be a throwing away of all the previous rules, perhaps in the blink of an eye, an exponential runaway beyond any hope of control" (Vinge, 1993). A form of techno-milleniarism, the advent of the singularity would radically change civilization.

It is his interest in the singularity, artificial intelligence, transhumanism and life extension that led Max to learn about The Seasteading Institute when he was invited to the premiere of a documentary about Ray Kurzweil, *Transcendent Man* (2009). The after-party was hosted at his house ("it's almost a mansion") and at this occasion he met "a large number of people in that [seasteading] community." Adam was optimistic about the prospects of optimized health and life extension (he took "about 10 supplements and multivitamins" daily) but at the same time he remained skeptical that multivitamins could really extend one's life when "in 10 years we can have nanobots swimming inside of our bodies, like, repairing, like, cellular damages." Adam's enthusiasm for technology was also tempered by his deep concern that technological innovations could be used as instruments of power and he turned gloomy when I asked him about seasteading and transhumanism.

> I mean… Unfortunately, what I am about to say is going to be kind of depressing and dark but it's actually kind of my theory about what's gonna happen in the future and why we're actually… doing things like seasteading.. is.. if you think about it, a lot of people including a lot of philosophers, kinda have separated humanity from nature, and then kinda pretended that evolution and competition and survival of the fittest is something that just kind of ended once we invented ethics, and you know, morality, but I think the fact of the matter is... that… competition is still happening, if not on a much greater magnitude, and I think that a lot of the upper class, kinda like elite, extremely wealthy people, are literally… just using the lower and middle class to get as wealthy as possible as

> fast as possible and basically escape into their own… you know, whether it'd be like a seastead or space colony, or you know, an underground thing while the rest of the people are pretty much left in economic collapse because if you... look at the way things are going in America certainly, like, shit is getting *really, really* bad, I mean you don't even have to be a conspiracy theorist to realize how insanely corrupt the government has been lately and, you know, there's really nothing we can do about it as average citizens except try to complain about it, or, you know,… just… it's…. so that's kind of, kind of why, there are transhumanists, people that want to be more advanced than the average person so they can be in control. You know. The government wants to be in control, that's why they're spying on everybody, that's why they are probably listening to this conversation right now in some data centre in Utah, you know.

Adam has raised multiple issues with the state of governance and of society today. He probably spoke for many when he said that he felt that "ethics" was a concept that had never been applicable and that he saw in the growing gap between the rich and the poor a clear proof that "competition is still happening." The technology that could solve our problem and offers the promise of a better, healthier future could also be used to heighten social divisions. As an "average citizen," Adam felt powerless politically. Wealthy people might just as well be getting reading to hide away from an imminent collapse, even though he lived in almost-a-mansion and drove an Audi, his own future was at the mercy of forces way beyond his reach. It painted a sorry picture of the present that Adam was only half-joking when he pointed out that there was no way to know whether this conversation was being monitored or not.

During the debate with Peter Thiel, David Graeber mentioned how in the sixties and seventies there was a shift away from investment in technological development partly because people were worried about what would happen when technology could replace workers. This concern is still present today, and perhaps even more so with the progress made in artificial intelligence research. One way for Adam to escape the scenario of his pessimistic predictions about the future was a resource-based economy[22], but even then, the prospect of robots replacing workers suggested potential social chaos.

[22] Resource-based economy is a concept developed by Jacque Fresco, a futurist and founder of The Venus Project, described on its website as "a veritable blueprint for the genesis of a new world civilization" (www.thevenusproject.com). In resource based economy "all goods and services are available to all people

> A robot's never gonna get sick, is gonna work twenty-four hours a day, it's gonna probably do the work of ten people, it's gonna be cheaper to pay them, they can't *sue* you, so I think the second that we have a humanoid robot that can replace physical human labour, you're gonna see either *massive* civil unrest because everyone's gonna be unemployed, I mean, there was just a noodle-making robot in China that put a hundred million people out of work. One noodle-making robot. Not one singular unit, the whole product. And so, what are we gonna do? […] I…. that transition is going to be *so* difficult for a lot of people to wrap their heads around, it's like… well, you know, if we all don't have jobs, what is money?

Like Graeber, Adam argued that we should consider money for what it is, and suggested that perhaps we should come up with a different, karma-based system. But he saw in seasteading a potential solution to the technological stagnation:

> I think well.. What is kind of confusing is why go through all the trouble of building a city on the ocean, and I mean the obvious answer is so you can create your own constitution, and, you know, not be bound by any pre-existing laws… so….. I have thought about this lately, is that, you know in the past, like, fifty years we've seen so much technological innovations in terms of like personal electronics and computers and things like that, but if you look around, like look at this, you know, strip mall, for example, like that all looks exactly the same as it did, you know, maybe not fifty years, like, physically not much has really changed. Cars, maybe, they are a little bit safer but they still go the same speed and, you know, it still takes six hours to fly from LAX to New York City, and that hasn't changed in, you know, almost sixty years. Like, we haven't been to the moon in what, fifty…five years or so? So it's kinda like… it's about time that we start developing technology for the *physical* world, you know, smarter houses, 3D printing buildings, uh, driverless cars and I think, if you can make a civilization work that just exists on the ocean, I mean, I don't see that as elitist, I see that as being an explorer, 'cause we don't really have much left to explore and until when we get to Mars, and you know, see what that place is all about…

From Adam's perspective, it only depended on what kind of people would be the pioneers. Adam said he would like to live on a seastead, so I asked him what his ideal seastead would be like:

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without the need for means of exchange such as money, credits, barter or any other means. For this to be achieved all resources must be declared as the common heritage of all Earth's inhabitants. Equipped with the latest scientific and technological marvels mankind could reach extremely high productivity levels and create abundance of resources" (www.thevenusproject.com). The Venus Project also has plans for cities in the seas.

> Hum.. Ideally you know it'd be big enough to where.. you know, it wouldn't feel like claustrophobic, you know, you'd want it to be I'd say at least the size of like a modern-day cruise ship, but maybe just spread out more, and I guess the challenge is always food, and you know… But, you know, I wouldn't want to do it by myself but I wouldn't want to do it if it was extremely crowded so I guess what matters is the balance and then the obvious question is: who do you invite? You know. Who gets the golden ticket? Like, have you seen Elysium? It's kinda like that, where, you know, all the wealthy, like, upper class people live up on Elysium and everyone else is just… you know… stealing cars and stuff down back on Earth.

Adam's ideal seastead was similar to that of the *Floating City Project Report* interviewees, but how the community would be formed was unclear and Adam worried that the financial cost of seasteading would make it a club for the extremely wealthy. Who, then, would be the lucky few pioneers of the next new world?

A land of one's own

Adam had spoked at length about the exclusionary nature of seasteading and the possibility that seasteads become hideouts for multibillionaires technologists. I was curious when, in another interview, Pierre, a Canadian businessman in the resort industry and also a seasteading enthusiast, insisted that seasteading was for everyone but the rich. Pierre was introduced to seasteading by his youngest son, Felix, a twenty year old seasteading supporter who had done volunteer work on The Seasteading Institute's website. After watching the "Eight Great Moral Imperatives" videos, Pierre decided to give ten thousand dollars to The Seasteading Institute.[23] He thought seasteading was "extraordinary":

> What is interesting in seasteading is that there will be no rules and regulations [to prevent land development] so you will be able to do whatever you want to do. I think this is very interesting because this is what is slowing us down here, in Québec, the provincial and federal regulations. It is always a very, very long process. It delays projects. Seasteading won't have this.

[23] The money transfer was delayed because of the banks procedures and during that time, and after a trip to the island of Roatan in Honduras which had been selected as the construction site for the first "coastead," a seastead located in the territorial waters of Honduras, Pierre changed his mind.

Like his tech savvy son, Pierre was highly interested in cryptocurrencies, especially Bitcoin, and he believed that a Bitcoin economy would be a significant advantage to seasteading. “If people really understood how much we are paying in banking fees, maybe they would make the switch,” Pierre argued. During our conversation, Pierre pointed to a “global discomfort” due to the “lack of incentives,” a term he deliberately used to show his agreement with The Seasteading Institute’s pitch line. He saw in crowdfunding and cryptocurrencies an alternative to borrowing from banks: “This is the future. This is the way we have to go. And I think that with seasteading, it will happen.”

A self-described environmentally-conscious entrepreneur, Pierre was also motivated by the promises of geothermic energy and aquafarming. When we spoke, he was in the process of making his property self-sufficient energetically and building greenhouses to grow organic vegetables for the resort’s restaurant. Pierre worked hard on his land and needed to have the certitude that he would be able to reap the fruits of his labor in the future: “You never really own the land, even if you think you do. The government can do whatever it wants.” For example, it could decide to change the zoning, a constant threat compromising business and investments:

> Here, at the resort, they have created “riverbanks protection zones”. That is not what it is. It only to prevent you from developing the space. It is always political. They change the regulations to prevent you from going forward. With seasteading, if you’re unhappy, you take your seastead and you go somewhere else, right?

Seasteading offered the possibility to own a place, decide of its location, and to operate it according to one’s ambitions. It promised a space free of the Kafkaesque bureaucracy tormenting small entrepreneurs who do not have squads of lawyers to lobby in their favour. For Pierre, seasteading was the most straight-forward way for small businesses to avoid red tape.

> There would be no regulations. Everyone is together, everyone takes care of his territory. Like the city here, but without rules. So you do whatever you want to do. And anyway, there is no grass to cut. And everyone works together. So if you’re unhappy, you go somewhere else. There must be no rules, no politics, no power trips there.

Because everyone would be equal, Pierre did not think that a police force would be necessary on a seastead.

> I don't think there will be any crazy people there. They will not be interested [to join] because they want to be in big cities where they won't be recognized. And you will attract the kind of people you want. There will be "peace people" and people won't go there for… You're living on water, you don't want to have… If there is one, he won't stay. He will go. He won't be comfortable there. The others… everyone will move away from him! And say to him: "go away, we don't want you with us." We'll detach his seastead and tell him to leave. You don't want to have rules because you don't want to have the army. […] When you eliminate power trips, you realize that in general people are good, they are willing to help, to collaborate. So when you remove all that, you have a life that is more humane, more sociable, and more agreeable. And people can dream, can do things. Otherwise, here it is very difficult to do business. We see it, we've been in an economic crisis for how many years now? Seasteading is the future. There is no other choice. This is where we have to go.

Unlike Adam, Pierre thought that human were naturally pacifist and desirous to live in community. Community building would happen organically with like-minded, highly motivated entrepreneurs gathering to build a better, freer world. But Pierre suggested that seasteading could never be elitist for practical reasons: it needs entrepreneurs and people willing to actively participate to its development in order to work. Unlike the interviewees in the *Floating City Project Report* (TSI, 2014) who imagined a more controlled, customer-like experience, Pierre spoke about the pioneering spirit of aquapreneurs and explained why seasteading is not for the rich:

> Not at all. This is for everyone. On the contrary, it is for the poor people, who could go on the seastead because there will be so many things to do. This is for everyone. It will be open to everyone, especially if it adopts electronic currencies. If there are electronic currencies, everyone will be able to borrow, everyone will be able to buy. […] If a person wants to work, you give him the possibility to borrow to buy, he will work and go live on the seastead. No, you don't want to have ultra-rich people, because *they* will want to bring in the police and the army over there, to defend themselves. They will want to impose rules and crush the others. No, no. You don't want that. You want ordinary people, people who believe in the mission, in

> the beauty of this. This is what you want. People who are ready to work, not people who just sit and do nothing. It will require people to clean, to build things, to bring ideas, create events, and supervise the food supply. It will require building infrastructure to grow food. So, people who want to build and innovate and bring healthy elements. No, you don't want retirees on this, you want people who want to innovate and bring new ideas. A free market. An open market.

Like Adam, Pierre was concerned about the political power being held by a few but unlike him he did not take for granted that "rich people" would be the ones to build the first seasteads: it could be crowdfunded instead. A seastead would not be a space of experimentation if it was occupied by rich, self-entitled egomaniacs but it could be revolutionary if it was developed by pacific entrepreneurs. Pierre was highly enthusiastic at the prospect of being part of the first coastead to be built by The Seasteading Institute and had been to Honduras to visit the island of Roatan where the coastead would be built. He described how American companies are polluting Roatan with "bunker oil" and spoke enthusiastically about how seasteading could produce cleaner and cheaper energy for Hondurans. Pierre concluded: "[The coastead]… it will completely change the landscape of the place."

Not everyone is convinced of the ecological benefits of seasteading and on the contrary are concerned with its potential environmental impact. Back at Ephemerisle, I also met Bernard, a French raised in California who worked in a private company and who had close connections to the tech industry. Bernard also described himself as a sailor. He had learned to sail at a very young age and his family was in the oyster culture and fisheries industries so he felt "a particular connection to the sea." Bernard compared oyster culture, a complicated process during which workers live on site in small houses often only accessible by boat, to "a small beginning of seasteading" and, although he always saw "problems" in the idea of seasteading and would not live on a seastead himself, he was still interested in the idea and curious to see how it would evolve.

Bernard explained how oyster culture entails a "symbiotic relationship between man, the sea, and the oysters." In the last twenty years, there have been attempts to introduce laboratory oysters in wild oyster culture to boost profit. In one documented case, the Bassin

D'Arcachon, the laboratory oysters did not survive while traditional oyster culture thrived. Bernard made a parallel with seasteading: "If I was sure that seasteading was environmentally-friendly, I think it would be tremendous. It would provide new opportunities. But the concern I have about the seasteading movement is the libertarian ideas behind it. In such a fragile ecosystem, I think there is a real risk if we mix both things." Bernard compared societies to ecosystems: "we can choose the ecosystem we want to live in." On the one hand, a system left to the market, without any regulations, could "push minorities and poor people further in the margins of society." On the other, technology offers an opportunity to better serve people. "*I am capitalist*," Bernard said in an affirmative tone.

> Absolutely. I believe in the free-market, but I also believe in regulations and in a social system where we need to help people who don't need to work, the elderly, women with young children, and even those who do not want to work. This is a little bit revolutionary, and a little bit Old World, but we really need to ask: what are the goals [of seasteading]. And there, I think, it is not very clear.

Bernard saw in seasteading an alternative to the deficient, crumbling structure of nation-states unable to meet the needs of glocalized citizens. He too argued, like Adam, that governments are resorting to mass surveillance and control to keep what little power and credibility they have left. In contrast, commerce offers a peaceful channel through which people from around the world connect.

> It is a wonderful idea to create a society outside actual governments, and I do think that the nation, as an organizational structure, is *dying*, and this is why we see, globally, that governments want more control, more surveillance, perpetual war, terrorism, against Russia, against these, against those, but… While this is happening, in commerce, we have global networks that are becoming stronger and with more people, where, in one day, I spoke with someone in Montréal, someone in Boston, someone in Amsterdam, and someone in Poland and Ukraine. I sent these emails today and I sell [a product]! This is incredible! […] I do not see a big difference between myself and my friend in Poland with whom I do business. I don't see that we have different interests. Our interests… basically are almost the same. We want to do good business. We want to have enough money to [practice sports]. We have many things in common! And we want to act on a local scale. We are not really interested in what happens in

> the whole country, but rather… if what happens in the country will have an impact on our life at home, in our cities, in Krakow and San Francisco. And this is where I think… this effort to break up from a nation, well, I think it is very interesting, because it shows all the ways in which a nation cannot give us what we need. So this is a good test. But from an environmental perspective, I think this is very complicated.

Bernard believes that entrepreneurs should be allowed to do business with anyone they wish without any state interference. While we should keep in mind that the free-market is not and has never been free (the 2008 financial crisis has clearly demonstrated how the market is wholly reliant on the intervention of the state, without which the banking sector would have entirely collapsed), what Bernard wanted was not bail-outs for banks, but the liberty to do business with whoever he wanted and that his life be not affected by international disputes in which he felt he had no party nor power. According to Bernard, the model of the nation-state does not fit the aspiration of twenty-first century citizens who see little difference between themselves and individuals from other countries sharing the same interests. New capitalism entrepreneurs now want to think locally and act globally.

On the island, off the island

Like other interviewees, Bernard was enthusiastic at the idea of forming intentional communities but wary of the risk that seasteading would recreate the same social divisions and problems it meant to solve:

> Every time we form a society, it becomes intentional. Every time we start a non-profit too, it is helpful, it becomes intentional. We also see that in apartments, condominiums. All these things are different forms of intentional communities. So I see that there are already many forms, many places where it already exist, and I wonder, in which way? And this is where I see a contradiction, really, with libertarian principles, in the idea of intentional communities. Because… where can we have this moment where it does not become… an oligarchy, right? Where people in power… have all the power… those who started the community have the power, and we can learn from this, and really leave greater liberty… And I think that we can only have this liberty with rules around. So, there is this great contradiction that is very difficult to solve.

In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (2008 [1968]), a book about Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters "amazing experiment in consciousness … out on a frontier neither they nor anybody else ever heard before" (p.53), Tom Wolfe writes about "being on the bus or off the bus" (p.83), meaning that you are attuned to the group's consciousness or you are not, you are part of the community or you are not. Similarly, Bernard pointed out that

> It is this question of… "apart," really, that makes things interesting… Because a community, truly, it is "you're on the island or you're off the island." Right? And there is always this challenge… of exclusion. And maybe this is problematic, in a world… where there are more and more connections between people and this gets even more complicated when we look at the environment.

Bernard thought that an appreciation of nature and of nautical life distinguishes the ocean pioneers of the sixties and seventies from the seasteading movement and recommended that I read *La Longue Route* by Bernard Moitessier (2012 [1971]), a French sailor and environmentalist. Jacques Cousteau too could be said to be somewhat of a seasteader: "He had a real respect for the ocean." He also suggested that I look up communities who live in bay areas and who have developed a sustainable way of life, often half in the sea, in the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar. He pointed out that "Eskimos" in Alaska and Greenland "literally live on the ice in a perfectly integrated relationship with water." "These are the *true* seasteaders," Bernard said, "who have lived this way for centuries."[24] Sailors also were true seasteaders, ready to face the unpredictability of the sea: "Sailors, when we go out at sea, we never know what is going to happen."

The interviews cited in this chapter illustrate many incoherencies within the seasteading project. While it is principally led by male supporters, Brit Benjamin warns that seasteading will not truly challenge the status quo of nation-state and the stagnation in political innovation if women do not use seasteading as a venue for emancipation through participation in the market. Adam, a techno-optimist supporter, is motivated by the prospects of a better future for

[24] Friedman and Taylor (2012) also list these groups as "perhaps the greatest proto-seasteaders" (p.226) and pay special interest to the social organization of sea nomads "since mobility seems to have led to a number of political advantages." (p.227)

humanity and freedom through technology but also concerned that technology might be used by elites to secure power. Offering an opposite perspective, Pierre spoke of the aquapreneurial spirit necessary to seasteading and how seasteading would not be a place for wealthy retirees but for ambitious, peaceful entrepreneurs. He saw in seasteading an economic, political and environmental solution to the problems caused by large government interventionism and bureaucracy. Bernard, on the other hand, expressed concerns about the environmental aspects of seasteading and how a libertarian political approach and unregulated market rule might have a negative ecological impact and also heighten already existing social cleavages. From his perspective, true seasteaders lived with nature in a symbiotic relationship and he did not see how libertarian values could ensure sustainability.

In all of the participants' narratives cited here, the ideas of creativity, innovation and inclusive community are crucial to seasteading's success. In comparison, interviews done by The Seasteading Institute for the *Floating City Project Report* with people chosen based on their financial capacity to afford the cost of living on a seasteads described the ideal seasteads as cruise ships or exclusive locations "away from society," secluded, exclusive places and spaces carefully designed around the need for security and privacy and offering a managed experience. But both groups share in common a dissatisfaction with the system of nation-states and a desire to pioneer new social assemblages that transcend known political and geographical boundaries. From this perspective, society is "not a society, but a collective" (Latour, 2005, p.14), not a given but a social and technological creation.

Peter Thiel (2009) wrote about seasteading that "the questions about whether people will live there (answer: enough will) are secondary to the questions about whether seasteading technology is imminent" (Para. 11). Meanwhile, if The Seasteading Institute still exists after seven years despite not having built a seasteading yet, it must be because it still does something. Actor-network theory considers that non-humans, including concepts have agency: "Non-humans have to be actors, not simply bearers of symbolic projection" (Latour, 2005, p.10). Seasteads do not exist physically but they exist conceptually, for examples, in the representations produced for The Seasteading Institute's annual contest and in the extensive online documentation of Ephemerisle by the organizers and participant

(www.ephemerisle.org; https://ephemerisle.github.io/) and through TSI's web site's forums. Perhaps then, as Latour (2005) suggests, we should not insist on the idea of being "already held by the force of some society when our political future resides in the task of deciding what binds us all together" (p.8).

5

CONCLUSION

BEYOND POLITICS / POLITICS AND BEYOND

In Austin, I stayed at an Airbnb rental. Renting a fully equipped one-bedroom cottage was cheaper than the hotel even though the conference offered a discount price and to the anthropologist, unless hotels are her object of study, Airbnb is a thousand times better than the synthetic environment of chained-brand hotels. My host, Rick, was a 35 years old Texan born and raised. Every day he wore worn out sneakers, jeans, a white t-shirt, and an old cap. He ate organic food and grew an impressive homestead garden in which a Betsy Ross flag flew high on a pole. There was a NRA sticker on the rear bumper of this truck and on the front door porch a doormat said “Beat it, hippie.” Rick did not talk much about himself but was passionate about politics and economics. Self-educated, he showed me his books and added his voice to the long list of people who told me, over the two years that lasted this research, that college was not worth it.

When, upon my arrival, I mentioned the Voice and Exit conference and The Seasteading Institute, Rick immediately said “Oh yeah... It’s one of Peter Thiel’s projects.” Later, as Rick showed me a few of his guns (he owned over a dozen), including a M16 standing on a bedside gun rack, I would see Thiel’s book *Zero to One* on top of a pile next to his computer. Rick related to the new capitalism movement and he too had a business idea which he did not want to talk about having signed a non-disclosure agreement. The idea of seasteading resonated with him as well, except he preferred land. Rick also seemed disappointed to have missed John Mackey’s presentation when I told him about it and was familiar with his ideas.

Self-described libertarian, Rick told me about his love for his country and his distrust for its government. He supported same-sex marriage but also thought that churches who did not want to marry same-sex couples should have the right to decline. He thought the KKK should be allowed to parade if they wanted to but that parents should take their children to show them this is wrong. During our conversations Rick was openly patriarchal and misogynist, candidly telling me how women should have children and stay home to raise them, how feminism had

destroyed real family values and how women's vote is based on emotions and fear. He told me all of this in a gently argumentative tone, without meaning any offense, just a kind reminder of what I should do according to "nature."

One evening, Rick and I went to the gun range (children welcome). After having me sign a form to confirm that I was sober and mentally sane, an employee asked me what kind of gun I would like to shoot. For ten dollars you could rent a large selection of firearms, AK-47 and all. Rick suggested that I select a small pistol. I had never heard a gunshot or smelled gunpowder before and, for the first five minutes, I jumped almost every time I heard a detonation. We put on earplugs and earmuffs ("It's very loud in there, better make it double"), plastic glasses and went through the two doors, one door at the time as a sign instructed us. Rick was a patient teacher and showed me how to stand, kicking my feet so that they stand parallel to my shoulders, bend forward and aim. Apparently, tourists go through bullets like crazy. I shot 120 rounds. When I asked Rick how long one must practice before getting good, he immediately replied "a thousand [bullets]." "But you did good," he said again, "better than most people." He kindly did not mention that I did not dare to load the magazine myself.

A teenage girl two stands to my left shot one of the ropes holding the faceless paper person she was trying to aim at. Everyone had to exit the room while the staff fixed it and Rick and I went outside for a smoke. Rick asked me about the Canadian "socialist" healthcare system. When I confirmed that some people voluntarily went to private healthcare providers to access faster services, he turned exclaimed to the men beside us: "You see that guys, socialist healthcare!" A few times, Rick called Canadians "socialists" or "weak". Like all other members of the British Dominion, we had been disarmed by the occupier. The American government, on the other hand, was afraid of its citizens because they owned millions of guns. "We could invade Canada very easily," he said. "Why would you want to invade us?" I asked. "To free you," he laughed. Despite his misogyny and the one time when, a bit tipsy, he whispered to me that "Hitler was a hero," Rick was a good host and we left each other good reviews on Airbnb's website.

This experience seemed to confirm that the ideas of a post-social and post-political or post-national way of belonging in the world and of salvation through technology and

entrepreneurship reach out further than just the Bay Area, yes, but Austin is not that far, and perhaps more importantly to a variety of different groups, some well-established and others more recent, who have in common to oppose state intervention, and often the state itself. I have come to think that it was only half-serendipitous that of all the rooms available in Austin I unknowingly chose a survivalism-inclined libertarian host who knew about Peter Thiel and seasteading. Everywhere I went, it seemed very true that "entrepreneurship has become the new common sense" (Szeman, 2015). I used the services of multiple Uber drivers during my stay in Austin, and sometimes in Montréal. Many were also working on a startup idea or planning to start a company in the near future and shared to same goals: to make money and shape the future. Billboard advertisings and sponsored Facebook posts all seemed to proclaim the gospel of the technological future. The advent of the next new world felt imminent. It had already begun.

Reassembling the post-social

Throughout this work, I have highlighted patterns of repetition where technology, capitalism and evolutionary theory reinforce each other, and patterns of opposition between Romantic ideals and rationalist beliefs. For examples, seasteading is inspired from evolutionary theory, hoping to lead the way towards "a Cambrian explosion in governance." Hoping to conquer new territories and new markets, seasteading also proposes a return to romantic, small-scale community along with the paradoxical idea that "spontaneity and organic energy can be achieved through planning" (Steinberg and al., 2012, p. 1539). At Voice and Exit, technology, capitalism and evolutionary merged into a lifestyle driven by self-optimization and human flourishing.

The Bay Area techno-optimist ideology has also been shaped by computer culture which is intimately linked to Romantic ideas of freedom and independence (Streeter, 2011). We use computer alone and they afford us experiences of transcendence in our one-person universes while software gives us the sense that there is no need for politics when we can coordinate ourselves with technology. Technology and optimized biology also hold the promise to allow us

to transcend ourselves and reach a permanent flow state of maximized productivity and well-being. Regarding transhumanism, Zoltvan Istvan wrote me that:

> As far as Silicon Valley tech culture, they're pretty close to one and same. People in Silicon Valley love technology and want to use it. It's not just work or a job. It's a lifestyle and commitment to the wonder in the world and awe of the future. Transhumanists are the same

The opposition between Romantic ideals and rationalists beliefs was perhaps most apparent at Ephemerisle. The event gives participants the opportunity to experience an ideal but ephemeral "neo-paleo" community, but at sea as on the San Joaquin River, the experience of seasteading will necessarily depend on the meteorological conditions and the state of mind of the participants.

Writes John Law (2004):

> [There is] a long-standing literature in the sociology of knowledge which insists that there are dramatically different and socially shaped understandings of history. These understandings are – yes – heroic, philosophically romantic, and discontinuous on the one hand, and evolutionary, rationalist and incrementalist on the other. The result [to Law's research] was that data and theory interacted together in a way that resonated and amplified one another to produce pattern and repetition. (p.111)

In this research too, I have come to identify these two understanding as "signs or instances of the two great narratives of history," and I chose to focus on these specific patterns, what Law calls "signals." There is a lot more that could be said about seasteading and the larger movement in which it evolves and I have unknowingly silenced elements others would have found necessary to brought forward. In their article on seasteading, Steinberg and al. (2011) conclude that

> Seasteading is less compelling as a potentially practicable model for recovering the originary spirit of capitalism on floating platforms than as a meme that joins a romantic dream with a critique that—its organizers hope—will spur fellow believers into action. As an *idea* (rather than as a model for the future), seasteading gains its traction not by promising the resolution of social contradictions, but by offering itself up as a reflection on the pathologies embedded

> in “mainstream” society’s attempts to harness the ideal of individual innovation to ideologies of territory, collectivism, and institutionalization. (p.1545)

Writing in 2011, the authors might have underestimated the power of seasteading as an idea or, understandably, could not have predicted how it would benefit from Silicon Valley’s techno-optimist ethos, grow in popularity, and join and inspire other similar movements. The idea of start-up countries also seems to be attracting a growing number of candidates. Other examples of initiatives aiming to foster political and economic progress by acting outside of present social and geographical boundaries include Blueseed, a for-profit Seasteading Institute offshoot, the Kingdom of North Sudan, proclaimed by an American farmer who hopes that it will be the world’s first crowd-funded nation (Jackson, 2015) and Liberland, a self-proclaimed micro-nation claiming a parcel of disputed land on the western bank of the Danube river between Croatia and Serbia, first proclaimed on 13 April 2015 by Czech libertarian politician and activist Vít Jedlička.

Seasteading is also more than just an idea since The Seasteading Institute’s staff and supporters are also active participants in a larger movement militating for a post-political society, as illustrated by the various network forums in which The Seasteading Institute promotes its vision for a better world. To academics and the media the idea of seasteading readily offers itself as a reflection on twenty-first century mainstream society’s pathologies but to seasteading supporters who, like Peter Thiel, prefer to focus on finding a cure rather than theorizing on the pathologies, The Seasteading Institute extends a very sincere invitation “to start building the future today,” as Thiel said at the debate described in the first chapter. Seasteading and these other attempts at building nation out of scratch are “liberty oriented,” techno-progressist responses to the perceived failure of the nation-state’s political structure to progress as fast as technology, the “technological stagnation” that Graber and Thiel discussed in the first chapter. The certitude that technologically advanced, subject-centered, small-scale communities are more appropriate than large democratic political structures as catalysts for social change also illustrates a broader shift in the collective imagination from social and political preoccupations to preoccupations with individual enhancement.

Throughout the debate, Thiel reaffirmed his "political atheism" multiple times. But to say that one is apolitical is very much a political statement and despite what Thiel said about exiting the structure, he is part of it through Palantir as well as millions in political donations[25] and membership in the notoriously select Bilderberg Group. Thiel said that if you have unconventional political beliefs, you should "never tell anyone everything you know." Perhaps you should also never believe someone who claims to be apolitical. Writes Bruno Latour (2005): "Every time an expression is used to justify one's action, they not only format the social but also provide a second order description of how the social worlds should be formatted" (p.231). Encouraging "tons of people to leave" and to give up on trying to change the "structure," is also a statement about how the social worlds should be, it is telling people to imagine certain alternatives and not others.

A common phrase in U.S. politics is that "all politics is local," meaning that a politician's success is directly tied to the person's ability to understand and influence the issues of their constituents. The non-political ethos of Silicon Valley of which Thiel is a leading advocate can be seen as an example of that. "Especially important is that which allows actors to interpret the settings in which they are located" (Latour, 2005, p.205), and in Silicon Valley technology and the market are the two main things through which actors interpret the settings in which they are located. The Seasteading Institute is part of a larger movement that presents "traditional" political activism as vain and that builds on the belief that the crowd is unable to exercise effective political power. But often, those who proclaim themselves free-market evangelist avoid to mention how the free market has never truly been free. The image of Silicon Valley's tech crowd leading the way to the future is reinforced by mainstream media but the region truly owes its success to its partnerships with the military-industrial complex and its close relationship with academia, especially Stanford University and MIT (Abélès, 2002). But as Silicon Valley gains in fame, with every country now emulating its technological hubs and accelerators, the techno-economic elite gets criticised not only for its elite camps at Burning Man (Burh, 2014) but also for its monopolistic claims on the future.

[25] Federal Election Commission, Entry: Thiel, Peter

Professor of history Yuval Noah Harari (in Cadwalladr, 2015) reminds us that for the first time in history, "we will see real changes in humans themselves – in their biology, in their physical and cognitive abilities" and contrasts the fast pace of modern technological development with the agricultural revolution, where "It was an incremental process, step by step, taking centuries, even thousands of years, which nobody really understood and nobody could foresee the consequences."

> Now the decisions are being taken by "a small international caste of business people, entrepreneurs and engineers". Governments have become "managers", [Harari] says. They have no vision, "whereas meet the people in Google, in Facebook, they have tremendous visions about the future, about overcoming death, living for ever, merging humans with computers. I do find it worrying that the basis of the future, not only of humankind, the future of life, is now in the hands of a very small group of entrepreneurs."

Thomas Schulz (2015), writing for Der Spiegel, makes a similar claim and compares this "societal transformation that ultimately nobody will be able to avoid" to 19th century industrialization. But the digital revolution, Schulz writes, "isn't just altering specific sectors of the economy, it is changing the way we think and live." And "This time, though, the transformation is different. This time, it is being driven by just a few hundred people" (Schulz, 2015).

Disrupting democracy

The Seasteading Institute reflects the ideologies and strategies of the place where it originated, the Bay Area, which novelist Jonathan Franzen (2015) described as "All that hacker capability mingling with the Occupy mentality" (Loc. 3271-3272). "Disruption" is a recurrent word in Silicon Valley (Davies, 2014). One of the most covered tech event is TechCrunch's Disrupt, parodied in the television series *Silicon Valley* (2014). Peter Thiel has also a short section on disruption in his book *Zero to One* (2014). In this book, Thiel's main point is that the best business strategy is monopoly. The best way to get a monopoly is to avoid disruption. Initially a term with a negative connation, disruption came to be understood positively in business language. But Thiel does not advise it because disruption was "coined to describe threats to incumbent companies, so startups' obsession with disruption means they see themselves through older firms' eyes" (p.56) and because "Disruption attracts attention:

disruptors are people who look for trouble and find it" (p.57). Instead, Thiel's advice is that "If you want to build something completely new, from 0 to 1, and have a monopoly: "avoid competition as much as possible" (p.57). But seasteading's ambition to be beyond democracy is disruptive.

Because "the high cost of open ocean engineering serves as a large barrier to entry, and hinders entrepreneurship in international waters," TSI has resolved "to look for cost-reducing solutions within the territorial waters of a host nation, while still remaining dedicated to the goal of obtaining political autonomy for governmental experiments" (TSI, "Vision / Strategy," n.d.). Since 2014, it has been focusing on the development of "coasteads" combining "principles of both seasteading and startup cities[26], by seeking to locate a floating city within the territorial waters of an existing nation" (TSI, "Floating City Project," n.d.).

> Our plan entails negotiating with a host nation for maximum autonomy for a seastead in exchange for the economic and social benefits it could provide. This will allow for a proof-of-concept, and will hopefully spawn many more experiments with floating cities around the world, including those further offshore, and under different legal arrangements. (TSI "Vision / Strategy," n.d.)

On May 20, 2015, The Seasteading Institute invited its supporters to join them and the President of Honduras in San Francisco on June 8 for a panel discussion titled: "Disrupting Democracy - *Creating Zones for Economic Development and Employment (ZEDE)*." (Quirk, 2015; TSI, 2015 (removed since)). The panel was co-hosted in San Francisco by The

[26] On July 31, 2011, Patri Friedman stepped down from his position as Executive Director of The Seasteading Institute (although he remains on the Board) and when, in August, 2011, Honduras amended their constitution to create a charter city program then known as Regiones Especiales de Desarollo (RED) (Wessel, 2011), Friedman founded Future Cities Development, Inc. and served as CEO and managing partner. The mission of Future Cities Development was "to benefit humanity by creating free societies. We envisioned a world where cities with innovative legal systems eradicate poverty, elevate human rights, and create unprecedented prosperity for the human race" (Friedman, "LinkedIn Profile," n.d.). However, on October 18, 2012, four of five Honduran Supreme Court justices declared charter cities unconstitutional and overturned the legislation. Future Cities Development, Inc. issued a closing statement the following day (A Thousand Nations, "Future Cities Development Ceasing Operations," 31 October 2012). Paul Romer (2009), an economist teaching at NYU Stern School of Business and Director of the Urbanization Project, is a leading advocate of charter cities as an engine of economic growth in developing countries. He was an initiator of the Honduras' charter city initiative in 2011 but he resigned in 2012 when MKG Group, a coalition of mostly American libertarian businessmen led by Michael Strong, previously a board member of The Seasteading Institute, signed a deal with Honduras to start building infrastructures without Romer's or the RED Transparency Committee's knowledge.

Seasteading Institute and Lincoln Labs.[27] The title of the event was eventually changed to "Free to choose cities: New opportunities for enterprise and governance in Honduras and beyond" (Lincoln Initiative, Eventbrite.com, 2015). TSI's newsletters invited seasteading supporters to come "learn about the unprecedented opportunities in Zones for Employment and Economic Development (ZEDE in the Spanish abbreviation), colloquially called "charter cities" or "model cities," and to "expect a major announcement" (Quirk, 2015; TSI, 2015).

The Seasteading Institute was in discussions with the Honduras' Zones for Employment and Economic Development (ZEDE)[28] committee and things looked promising until June 2015, a few weeks after TSI's newsletter was sent out, when protesters marched in the capital to denounce the corruption of President Juan Orlando Hernández's government (Gies, 2015; Harkinson, 2015; Malkin 2015; Palencia, 2015). The Honduran president and his staff cancelled their participation on the Lincoln Labs panel, and on the evening of the June 8 event, at least a dozen anti-Hernández protesters rallied outside the venue (Harkinson, 2015). Randolph Hencken, Director of the Seasteading Institute, apologized to the attendees:

> Here in Silicon Valley, when we want to improve something, we say 'disrupt.' Nobody in Honduras approved or even knew about that whimsical title, which, when translated from English into Spanish, could easily be construed in a negative and unintended light. (in Harkinson, 2015)

The Honduras ZEDE Committee (2015) issued a statement disassociating itself from the event and discussions stopped. The Seasteading Institute is now exploring other opportunities in Central America.

A boat that could be

David Graeber writes that:

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[27] Lincoln Labs is an organization founded in 2013 by a former Mitt Romney campaign staffer (Harkinson, 2015) and made up of "entrepreneurs and technologists who believe that technology and innovation are key ingredients to a more free society" (Lincoln Labs, n.d.). Lincoln Labs' mission is "to create and support a community of like-minded individuals who desire to advance liberty in the public square with the use of technology" (Lincoln Labs, "Organization," n.d.).

[28] ZEDEs are a reformulation of REDs.

> If the history were truly written, it seems to me that the real origin of the democratic spirit – and most likely, many democratic institutions – lies precisely in those spaces of improvisation just outside the control of governments and organized churches. (Loc 2581)

Foucault has suggested that ships might be such places. What to make then of seasteading's ambition to be "beyond democracy"? The Seasteading Institute aims to be "beyond democracy," to offer something better than democracy, a system where highly mobile citizens make their choices known with their dollars. In this alternative to democracy, the only involvement appears to be financial. Renato Rosaldo (1993) defines cultural citizenship as "the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense." With seasteading, the possibility of leaving, the right to exit, is just as important as the right to belong. It is a step towards a new kind of cultural citizenship, new kinds of cultures and new kinds of societies. In fostering competitive governance and political innovation, the goal of The Seasteading Institute is not democracy, or re-shoring and "bringing it all back home," as John Urry wrote, but the creation of a Next New World, of a renewed society that incorporates the concept of flow both in its philosophy and infrastructures.

With this research, I hoped to bring something new to the discussion by offering portraits of not-uber-wealthy seasteading supporters. I described Voice and Exit and Ephemerisle, two "network forums," the former a conference to which TSI's staff participated and that attracts link-minded techno-optimists and the latter an annual festival organized by seasteading enthusiasts, to give a clearer sense of the kind of community-building and social reassembling this movement is accomplishing. The idea of a floating city has always piqued the imagination of authors and eccentrics and in a way, the apparition of the cruise ship offered such an experience of extraterritorial hypermobility. To be feasible, seasteading as envisioned by The Seasteading Institute must be exclusive. It needs citizens that are able to afford the cost of renting or buying a space on a seasteads. But others, like Jerome FitzGerald (date), have thought of seasteading in more modest ways. It is the strong symbolism projected on the ocean as the perfect medium for a globalized, flowing world and on ships as self-contained microcosms that makes it an ideal stimulant for the imagination to start planning the society of tomorrow. Foucault writes that "In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes

the place of adventure, and the police takes the place of pirates" (p.9). The goal of seasteading is to make sure this does not happen.

In one of her compositions, Brit Benjamin sings that "If I'm not a ship, I'm a boat that could be." It was easy for me to read in these lyrics an allegory of seasteading, as in "If I can't be a country I can be a seastead," or "If I can have absolute freedom I can still have as much freedom as possible." But Brit had a more elaborate and more accurate (obviously, since she wrote the lyrics) explanation:

> To me, the song is about being small or in the early stages of something but feeling hopeful that you will someday be something grand and glorious. If I'm not yet what I hope to be, I'm at least able to conceive of the end goal that I am working toward, which means that some part of the end goal is already inside of me. It's like saying "If I'm not a flower, I'm still a seed." (Brit Benjamin, personal communication, 2 March 2016).

The Seasteading Institute and the movement it is part of also carry a similar message, and even seasteading is still a seed, it is still a place that could be.

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